

GAMEINFORMER®





**NEW
YEAR,
NEW
GAMES.**





GET 'EM AT
GameStop
 POWER TO THE PLAYERS™



EDITOR'S NOTE

THE BEST GAMES OF 2021



ANDREW REINER
Editor-In-Chief

WHAT I'M PLAYING
Halo Infinite, Fortnite

WHAT I'M WATCHING
Only Murders
in the Building

WHAT I'M READING
Thor, The Amazing
Spider-Man

FAVORITE GAME OF ALL TIME
The Legend of Zelda:
Link to the Past

THE ISSUE OF *GAME INFORMER* YOU HOLD IN YOUR HANDS has been a long time coming. We've been talking about redesigning the magazine and finding ways to modernize its look and content for years. Ideas came and went, but work in earnest didn't begin until the fall of 2020. Over most of the following year, we splintered off time from our everyday duties to bring *Game Informer* into the future. I'm so proud of our editorial team for the creativity behind some of the articles you'll see in the months ahead. And our design department deserves a standing ovation. Take a bow, Jeff Akervik (creative director), Laleh Azarshin

(senior graphic designer), Mónica Rexach Ortiz (graphic designer), and Jen Vinson (former graphic designer). You've made a work of art!

The new direction for *Game Informer* boils down simply to "a celebration of games." We'll still be bringing you huge, world-exclusive cover stories and detailed reports on the games we feel you should be playing or have on your radar. Something new you'll see is the added element of staff insights – little callout boxes that bring you thoughts or recommendations from someone on staff. When I started working at *Game Informer*, one of my favorite sections was the editor blurbs: a dense page of text detailing what each writer was into each month. These new callouts bring back that idea and spread it throughout the book.

As you turn through the pages, you'll see other new ideas, but most of what we've cooked up will be coming in future issues, as the majority of this issue celebrates the best titles of the year. We played as many games as we could and assembled a fantastic roundup. In addition to awarding the Top 10 Games of the Year as determined by *Game Informer's* editors, we also highlight the best games in each genre, along with titles individual editors feel deserve the spotlight. Our Games of the Year coverage should prove to be a great roadmap to playing most of 2021's notable releases.

And we couldn't think of a better way to ring in the new year than with a comprehensive study on robotic dinosaurs. Features editor Kimberley Wallace loved 2017's *Horizon Zero Dawn* and penned a massive, 12-page article for the sequel, *Forbidden West*. Along with exclusive details and insight from the development team, she breaks down exactly what you can expect from Aloy's combat prowess in this enormous new adventure.

From all of us at *Game Informer*, we hope you have a great holiday and end to your year. Here's to 2022 being everything we hope it is for family, friends, and games!

Reiner



HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST

Aloy brings light and healing from the red blight to the deer and the forest around it in this striking image, crafted exclusively for *Game Informer* by the artists at Guerrilla Games. Our gameplay demo for the cover story was conducted remotely on December 2, with *Game Informer* in Minneapolis and Guerrilla in Amsterdam.

Contents



spotlight

10 **2021: THE YEAR IN REVIEW**

Hopeful and tumultuous, 2021 ran the gamut. The year in the game industry was no different. From massive surprise releases, more hardware shortages, and corporate scandals, take a look back at the biggest headlines from 2021.

20 **COVER STORY – HORIZON FORBIDDEN WEST**

Aloy heads west to confront bigger dangers, unearth new mysteries, and learn fresh skills. Our cover story details how Guerrilla Games is elevating her adventure with smart improvements and exciting new features to stay on top.

32 **DYING LIGHT 2: BACK FROM THE DEAD**

Years after its ambitious E3 reveal, we finally played Dying Light 2: Stay Human. From the scope of its world to its terrifying undead, here's everything you need to know before the game's release next year.

38 **TOP 10 GAMES OF THE YEAR**

As 2021 comes to a close, we've gathered our 10 favorite games of the year. From unexpected indie darlings to the biggest tentpole releases, discover what we liked best and what we awarded 2021's ultimate Game of the Year.

46 **THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST**

With so many interesting, standout games this year, alongside our top 10, here are some of the most memorable games the *Game Informer* staff played in 2021.



regulars

04 STAFF SPOTLIGHT // **06** REPLIES // **14** TOP FIVE
16 GEAR // **58** PREVIEWS // **70** REVIEWS // **84** ONE LAST THING

GAMEINFORMER

Volume XXXII / Number 1 / Issue 342



**Our next issue launches digitally on 2/1
with the print edition to follow**

For renewal, address change and
Power Up Rewards Pro details:

Web: gamestop.com/faq

Email: care@gamestop.com

Mail to: **625 Westport Parkway**
Grapevine, TX 76051 • Attn: Guest Care

For subscription inquiry only:
800-883-8895



Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer® Magazine, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy, resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.

Game Informer® Volume 32 Issue 342 December 2021 (ISSN: 1067-6392) is published monthly except April and December, at a subscription price of \$19.99, by Sunrise Publications®, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. Business, Editorial Offices, Accounting and Circulation Offices: PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011. To subscribe or for customer service inquiries call 1-800-883-8895. Canada & Mexico orders must add \$25/year additional postage. All orders must be prepaid in U.S. dollars by check, money order, or credit card. PowerUp Rewards™ Pro Card may be purchased for \$12.00 (includes \$7.00 S&H). Periodicals postage paid at St Paul, MN 55164-5015 and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIBERS: Send address changes to Game Informer®, 625 Westport Parkway Grapevine, TX 76051 Attn: Guest Care. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS. See DMM 507.1.5.2; NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to (Game Informer®, PO Box 144 Cedar, MN 55011).

STAFF SPOTLIGHT



Margaret Andrews

Production Director

This has been a great year for books and I couldn't have picked a better time to make an effort to read more. I started strong with a binge of the full Shadow & Bone series by Leigh Bardugo, in preparation for the TV show, and it absolutely lived up to the hype. Later I read what's probably my favorite book this year, *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by TJ Klune followed closely by *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid. A few I'm looking forward to in 2022: *Gallant* by V.E. Schwab and *House of Sky and Breath* by Sarah J. Maas.



Kimberley Wallace

Features Editor

I've always been a collector, so it's no surprise that I enjoy monster collecting in video games. November brought us two wildly different experiences in Shin Megami Tensei V and Pokémon Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl. With a dark tone and high challenge, SMTV makes every new demon feel like a game-changer for survival. Pokémon is much more relaxing to play, and I take great delight in building a bond with the adorable creatures. Both are worth your time and borrow from each other, but have their own unique identity.

GI MERCH



snag yours

➤ gameinformer.com/merch ➤➤

Replies



HALO INFINITE

Halo Infinite is my Game of the Year, and nothing else even comes close. I'm saying this even before getting my hands on the single-player campaign. The multiplayer package that 343 Industries has put together is that good! I am so impressed with the fluidity of play, weapon balancing, and fair approach to the unlocks. Yes, we have to pay for the Battle Pass, but that more than makes up for getting the entire multiplayer package for free! The Battle Pass also doesn't expire, meaning we don't have to crunch levels or purchase them to get the unlocks we want before the timer expires. I don't think I'll be playing another game any time soon. I am hooked, and I love it!
– Alphonso Lhota via email

↪ *We hope other developers take a good look at Halo Infinite's Battle Pass system. Removing the frustration of completing it in a certain number of months is a huge step forward in drawing the poison from microtransactions. The one big downfall we saw for the Battle Pass at launch is how it pushed players to play the game in certain ways to unlock experience points. This system takes players out of their comfort zone, which in turn can affect the performance of the entire team. However, it seems like 343 is taking steps to course correct, recently implementing a system that rewards additional experience for the first six matches of the day.*

I feel like a kid again! Halo Infinite is taking me back to the glory days of Xbox multiplayer. I know the online services are lightyears better than they were 20 years ago on the original Xbox, but Microsoft lost the magic of the Halo experience in that time. Halo Infinite brings it back in a big way. My friends and I are once again competing at a high level in ranked play. We just need the LAN party to return. If only we

didn't live 500 miles apart now.
– Julia Thompson, Washington, D.C.

↪ *Halo Infinite's multiplayer delivers a nostalgic vibe while blazing a new path forward for this legacy franchise. Many Game Informer staffers are also hooked on ranked play. Video editor Alex Van Aken is our ringer who nets a high kill-to-death ranking while also playing the objective.*

I understand why Microsoft is hanging its hat on Master Chief and his history as a way to bring back Halo fans, but he always hits me as a character out of time. We never see his face, and he comes darn close to being a silent protagonist. He comes across as an armored Jason Vorhees. Is it sacrilegious to say he should be revamped for the modern age of storytelling? If it is, this question comes from my brother Pete and not me.
– Rose V. via email

↪ *We all want to know who is under the mask. That reveal will likely never come, and that's okay. This mystery is a big part of what makes Master Chief a unique character. If anything changed, maybe he could wear a different colored suit from time to time. Perhaps he could wear blue on Wednesdays.*

ROCKSTAR GAMES

As someone who grew up with PlayStation 2 and PlayStation 3 as my first two systems, Rockstar Games was THE developer that was innovating and pumping out unbelievable experiences. Now we rarely hear from that studio. Has Rockstar become the house of just Grand Theft Auto and Red Dead Redemption? Do we just get one new game from them a generation?
– Lyla Servino via email

↪ *If we lived in a perfect world, we would see Rockstar games pumping out releases again, and taking chances on offbeat projects like The Warriors and Bully. We would also want to see the studio continue to innovate with Grand Theft Auto and Red Dead Redemption – efforts that take years to develop. We want the best of both worlds, but right now, it would appear Rockstar is locked into making huge and long-living open-world experiences.*

HAPPY 30!

I can't believe how fast time has flown, *Game Informer*! It feels like I started subscribing just a few years ago, yet I've been getting your magazine in my mailbox for over a decade! I just wanted to reach out and thank you for all of the excellent magazines. You've turned me on to so many great games!
– Michael Ares, Chicago, IL

VALVE IS BACK!

Valve seems to be 'picking up steam' again after a lull. It created Index, Steam Deck, and is even adding content to Counter-Strike:GO. How much of a revival do you think this will be – on a scale of 'a new handheld competitor' to 'Half-Life 3 may actually come out'?

– NinjaMasterDave via Discord

↪ We love seeing Valve active in so many different things – most notably as a game developer. *Half-Life: Alyx* proves this studio can still deliver unforgettable experiences in that universe. As for your scale of what is more likely to happen next, we have a feeling both are likely. Steam Deck looks like it could be a huge hit in the handheld space, especially if big, high-end games can run on it without many issues. *Half-Life 3* is also more likely after *Alyx*'s success, although continuing Gordan Freeman's story is a much more challenging entry point to further revive the series.

SONY'S "HOUSE STYLE"

Are we ever going to see a Sony exclusive that isn't some variation on third-person action-adventure? It's been seven years since the last *Killzone* and even longer since stuff like *Puppeteer*, *ModNation Racers*, and *Under Siege*. I miss the PS2/3 days when Sony used to whip out all of the wild and crazy exclusives. Now it feels like they're only interested in one "house style" no matter the actual genre of the game. Don't get me wrong, I've enjoyed some of their new stuff like *Days Gone* and even *Knack*, but I miss the other stuff. The PS3 exclusives library is what legitimately got me into even gaming on consoles after years of playing only on PC. – Elijah (Paradigm the Fallen) via Discord

↪ From *God of War* and *Uncharted* to *Spider-Man* and *Ghost of Tsushima*, many of Sony's bigger titles are story-driven, third-person experiences. Given how great most of these games are, we don't want Sony to change a thing. The company has been on a roll with its development teams. That said, Sony's catalog does expand beyond this footprint. Games like *Dreams*, *Gran Turismo Sport*, *Predator: Hunting Grounds*, and *MLB The Show 21* show Sony's range into other genres.

GAMING AND LIFE

With the nature of the job, it seems like games journalists are online all of the time. How does the *Game Informer* team find a healthy balance between being online (Twitter, steaming, etc.) and enjoying life outside of the industry? Furthermore: Are you all staying hydrated? You better take a water break right now! Love you, *GI*. – Sarah Renninger via IWTEOSP

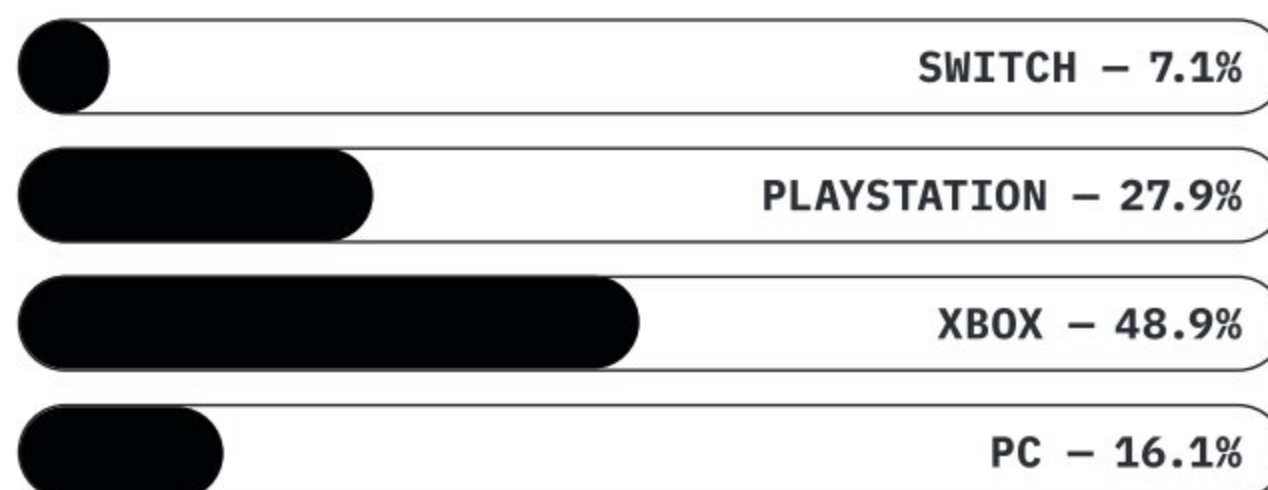
↪ Alex Van Aken: I limit myself to one main form of social media and try to restrict my use of others. I often delete apps from my phone when I want to distance myself for a few days, even if I redownload them later.

↪ Andrew Reiner: I value my family more than anything in life, and always put them first. Since my daughter and I love games, my work and entertainment frequently cross over. Some of my work is made better by my kiddo.

↪ Matt Miller: When your job is also one of your favorite hobbies, it's easy to get caught up in the happenings of gaming and the industry around it. In off-work hours, I make a point to set my phone and controllers aside when an opportunity arises for real family or friend time; the games (and their news) will be waiting when I get back, but real-life moments are too easy to miss.

POLL:

Which gaming system is having the best year?



39,096 total votes – Poll conducted via Twitter



Reader art submission: Brandey Albanese

↪
Join the conversation

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com

NFTS

I recently saw Electronic Arts say NFTs will be a big part of gaming in the years to come. Should I investigate NFTs, cryptocurrencies, and the blockchain to learn what the future of games holds?

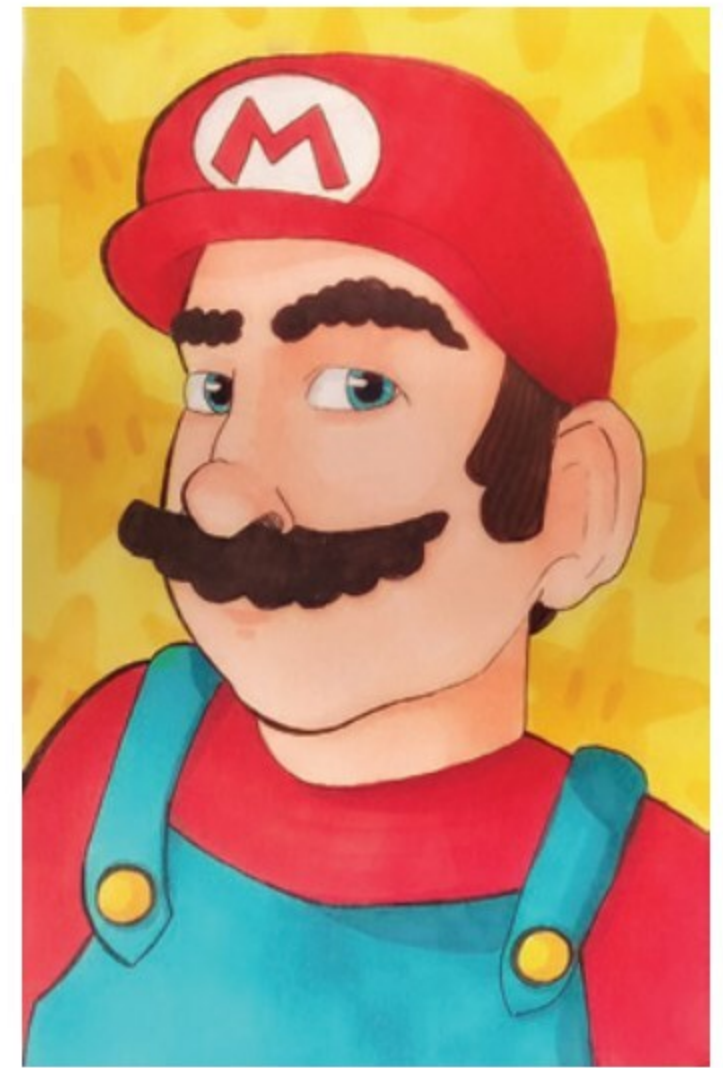
– Tyler Schoen via email

↪ *NFTs are taking the world by storm, and in their wake, bringing plenty of questions and controversies. Like you, we are waiting to see if NFTs will become a part of our everyday console and PC gaming. There are already many NFT games out there and some are exploding in popularity. A lot of publishers we cover here in Game Informer are dipping their toes into NFTs, too, including Bandai Namco, Ubisoft, Square Enix, and Capcom. Valve is taking a different stance with its Steam platform, and won't allow games that use blockchain technology, cryptocurrencies, or NFTs. There's certainly an audience for NFTs, and it is growing at a rapid rate, but is it something we'll like seeing in our games? Time will tell. We'll likely start seeing more developers experiment with them in the next year or two.*

A YEAR DEFINED BY INDIES

I wasn't drawn in by most of the big releases this year. Battlefield 2042 and Call of Duty: Vanguard didn't interest me at all, and I'm not a roguelike fan, so I stayed away from Returnal and Deathloop. Some of the other notable releases were remakes or old series coming back. Those didn't interest me, either. All of that said, I think I played more new games this year than I ever have. The indie scene was fantastic! My favorite shooter was Splitgate. The best adventure was Sable. I also thoroughly enjoyed Everhood, Genesis Noir, Eastward, She Dreams Elsewhere, and the list goes on and on. This ended up being one of my favorite years in gaming due to all of these unique experiences. – Kyle Rademaker, Cleveland, OH

↪ *Each year we see indies come out of nowhere and turn heads, and others we've been highly anticipating finally hit the market. You are right; 2021 is loaded with exceptional indie titles, and we celebrated several in our best-of-the-year lists, which you can read about beginning on page 46.*



Reader art submission: Emma Grace

KINECT

What's the most bizarre moment in the history of GI? – Cody Taggart via IWTEOSP

↪ *That's an easy question to answer: The strangest moment in Game Informer's history is when the rock band GWAR visited our office and spent an hour playing Kinect games in our conference room. Given their love of extravagant costumes (often with oversized body parts), watching them bounce around while playing motion-based games was an eye-opening and frightful experience.*

FAMOUS ACTORS

I picked up the Grand Theft Auto trilogy on Switch, and was immediately taken aback when I heard the great actor Samuel L. Jackson voicing a police officer in San Andreas. We don't see famous actors in video games like we used to. Is the talk of video games becoming the next Hollywood dead?

– Steven Landini via email

↪ *Keanu Reeves starring in Cyberpunk 2077 shows that video games and actors can be a perfect match. We are seeing less of them, as many developers prefer to create their own characters and not use actor likenesses or familiar voices. We'll likely continue to see both approaches over time. Video games will not overtake the movie industry, and will continue to sit alongside it as a great means of entertainment.*

Soundoff:

Reader Moments
of the Year

Finishing up Shadowbringers in Final Fantasy XIV. [This is] easily one of the best expansions for a game I've ever played. I can't wait to see how they try and top it with Endwalker. – Garrett McFadden via Twitter

Clutching a Big Team Battle slayer win in Halo Infinite last night with a Warthog Killtacular. It was in that moment that I felt the Halo of old come rushing back. – Will Kavanagh via Twitter

Rolling credits on Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart. I've been playing the series since I was, like, five years old, and to see how far it's come. I couldn't stop smiling, laughing, and crying tears of joy. Such a wonderful game. I'm very grateful one of my childhood favorites lives on!

– Nick #BringBackSlyCooper via Twitter

Having a heart-to-heart with Drax while staring into the edge of space in Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy. – Philly YeetSteak via Twitter

Watching the Metroid Dread trailer for the first time. I'm 37 and I felt like I was 12 all over again. – Fyasko51 via Instagram

SPORT EXCLUSIVES

In the history of video games, has there been a worse idea than the NFL signing exclusively with EA Sports? Seriously, we had a handful of games to pick from each year, and then suddenly, we had one game that may or may not be good. What a disaster for the sport and fans of it. – **Angry John, Bangor, ME**

↪ *Nintendo's Virtual Boy is a worse idea, but the NFL turning its back on 2K Sports and other developers for a sizable sum is not far behind it. The exclusive move killed off the NFL 2K series right when it was hitting its stride (and for a steal at just \$20). The world of football game development was just as fierce in competition as the games on the gridiron. Here's hoping we see more developers get the rights to the NFL in the future. As they say, competition spurs innovation.*

NINE AND HIGHER

I've never written in to a magazine before, and I doubt you'll run this letter, but I wanted to say thank you for turning me on to a game called Brutal Legend back in 2007. I've been a loyal subscriber ever since and have played as many games as I can that your critics give a 9 or higher to. Congratulations on 30 years of making the most informative and useful magazine on the planet! – **Juan Blee via email**

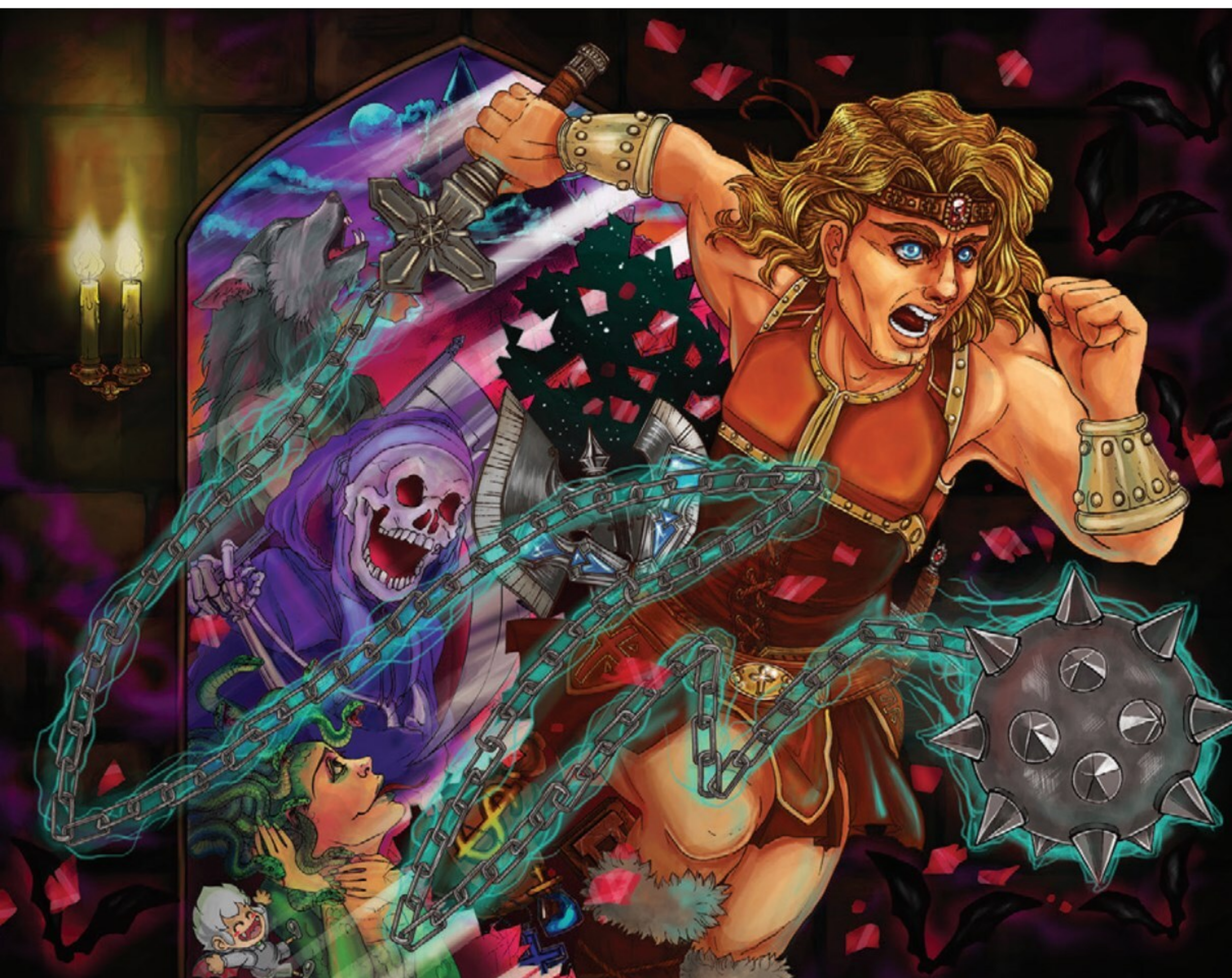
THE DEMAND FOR CHIPS

Do you think the chip shortages, shipping congestion, and scalper issues will have generation-lasting effects on current consoles, or will it just be a short-term problem (relatively speaking)?

– **Quinton Crowe via Facebook**

↪ *Given how many industries rely on chips and specific technologies, we don't see this issue going away any time soon. The reasons for*

the shortages and manufacturing bottlenecks are multifold, many stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic straining supply lines, shutting down factories, and upending global economies. Demand for gaming consoles, graphics cards, and most things needing chips are through the roof. Even if our industries return to their pre-pandemic flows, the overwhelming demand will continue to create issues. ■



Reader art winner: Michele Kim

➤ **Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!**

Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com



The Year In Review

Big industry changes, scandal, and the return of one of gaming's best

As 2021 winds down, we're taking the chance to look back at all the biggest head-turners of the year. It might not be every headline, but from massive games and world-shaking controversies, to COVID-19's continued effect on the industry, and more, these are some of the biggest news stories of 2021.

BY BLAKE HESTER



Delays and Shortages

What better issue of *Game Informer* than this one to boldly declare: This year was a good year for video games. From triple-A standouts, such as Halo Infinite, Resident Evil Village, and Forza Horizon 5, to indie darlings like Inscryption, Before Your Eyes, and Sable, 2021 had it all.

The year's excellent releases couldn't have come at a better time, as 2021 was also the second year the globe was ravaged by the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, forcing many people to remain at home more than they usually would. However, the ongoing pandemic continues to affect the game industry's various production pipelines, leading to continued hardware shortages and numerous software delays.

While Nintendo was able to release its new Switch OLED model this year, the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S continue to elude many both online and in stores – even as they complete their second

holiday season on the market. While this affects the video game world, it's not unique to it. The global supply chain in general has been affected by COVID, slowing down how quickly manufacturers can ship out any number of goods. Furthermore, the continued global chip shortage affects 169 different industries, *Yahoo! Finance* reported back in April. The video game industry is just one of many major fields affected.

To make matters more complicated, many companies that can accommodate work-from-home still haven't returned to the offices. While this is safer for all parties involved, it does impact game development. This likely isn't the sole cause for any given delay – video games are difficult to make, and any number of things can go wrong – but massive upcoming releases like God of War: Ragnarok, Horizon Forbidden West, and GhostWire: Tokyo, amongst others, were all delayed out of this year.

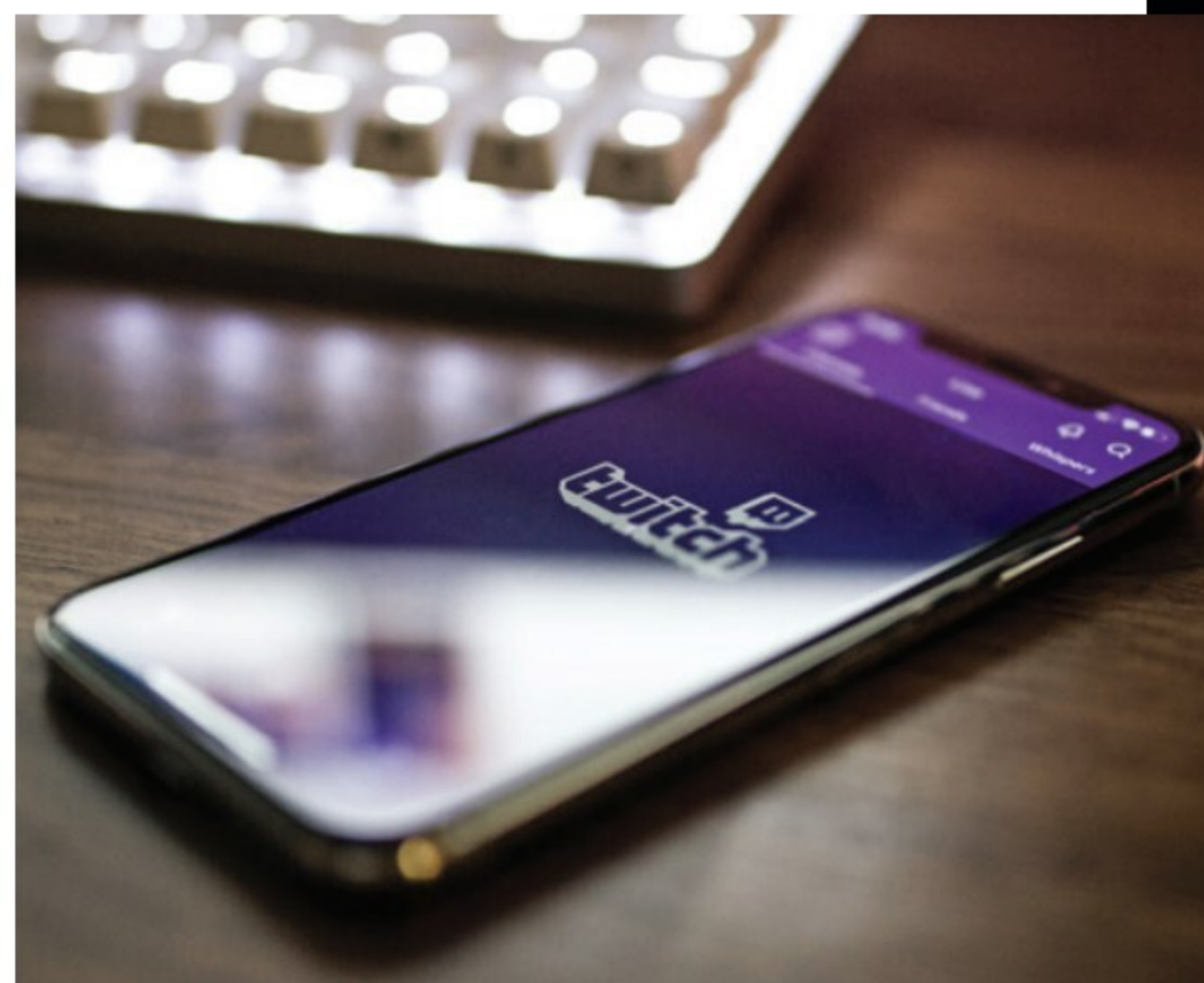
Money Changes Hands, For All Eyes to See

In any given year, many top stories in the game industry revolve around money, of which there is a lot. Who bought who? What sold how much? This year was no different – and some of the amounts we saw were staggering.

Announced in 2020, Microsoft finalized its acquisition of ZeniMax Media, the parent company of Bethesda, this March, to the tune of \$7.5 billion – making it one of the most expensive acquisitions in video game history. While we still don't know what exactly this means for future Bethesda games on other platforms going forward, at the very least, tentpole series such as Fallout, Elder Scrolls, and Starfield are all under the Microsoft umbrella now.

As usual, Tencent, the Chinese technology company that's become one of the most valuable in the world, was on a spending spree. According to consumer analytics group Niko Partners, Tencent closed 51 video game deals this year – including buying developer Sumo Group for \$1.26 billion. Furthermore, Sony bought fighting game tournament Evo in March. Epic Games acquired Rock Band developer Harmonix and Fall Guys developer Mediatonic. And Netflix acquired Oxenfree developer Night School Studios.

But one of the most eye-opening revelations about money in the game industry came from Twitch. Specifically, a 125GB leak exposed the earnings of the platform's top personalities. In October, due to the leak – which also exposed Twitch's source code – we learned that top-five creators such as Critical Role, Tfue, and NICKMERCS made between \$5 and \$10 million between August 2019 and October 2021 from donations, subscriptions, and advertisements. As Kotaku points out, we also learned that, of Twitch's top 100 performers, only three are women, and only one is a woman of color. Twitch's top female streamer was Pokimane, who ranked as the platform's 39th most popular.



Activision Blizzard's Reckoning

(Content warning for sexual harassment, rape, and suicide)

In July, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing announced it was suing Activision Blizzard, the developer and publisher behind game series like *World of Warcraft* and *Call of Duty*, kicking off what is easily the biggest story of the year in the game industry. The lawsuit alleged the company had allowed sexist and discriminatory behavior – including lower pay for women than men, a “frat boy” culture, sexual harassment, and, in the case of one victim, suicide on a business trip provoked by a supervisor’s actions.

The details of the lawsuit paint a devastating picture for one of the largest publishers in video games – and details the sheer level of heinous behavior present at its various studios. Shortly after the lawsuit was made public, as detailed by *Polygon*, more than 2,600 current and former Activision employees signed an open letter calling for the company’s response. On July 28, a walkout was organized outside Activision’s Irvine, Calif., headquarters. A subsequent report from *Kotaku* further detailed the behavior of *World of Warcraft* senior creative director Alex Afrasiabi, named in the lawsuit, and how he and other employees had taken to social media in the past to boast about their

alcohol-fueled behavior at conventions. In the lawsuit, Afrasiabi was said to “hit on female employees, telling him he wanted to marry them, attempting to kiss them, and putting his arms around them. This was in plain view of other male employees, including supervisors, who had to intervene and pull him off female employees.”

In response, Activision Blizzard issued a statement, claiming the DFEH’s suit “includes distorted, and in many cases false, descriptions of Blizzard’s past. [...] While we find this behavior to be disgraceful and unprofessional, it is unfortunately an example of how they have conducted themselves throughout the course of their investigation.”

Public reaction to this response, predictably, didn’t go well, prompting Activision CEO Bobby Kotick to issue his own statement, calling the company’s response “tone deaf,” and saying he was



“sorry that we did not provide the right empathy and understanding.” Kotick also announced Activision had hired a third-party law firm to “conduct a review of our [Activision Blizzard’s] policies and procedures.”

Throughout the entire ordeal, Kotick downplayed his knowledge of the issues within his company. He even cut his salary to \$62,500 – “the lowest amount California law will allow for people earning a salary,” as he put it – until “transformational goals” were met. Per *The Hollywood Reporter*, in 2020, Kotick’s total Activision compensation for the year was \$30.1 million.

However, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal* in November, Kotick not only knew about the behavior within Activision but had actively hidden evidence from company shareholders and mistreated women himself.

Among a slew of damaging details, *WSJ*’s report further highlights misconduct at Activision studios. According to the outlet, a woman working at Sledgehammer games told HR she was raped twice by her supervisor, though HR took no action. When co-head of Treyarch Dan

Bunting was accused of sexual harassment, Kotick stepped in to keep him aboard after HR recommended he be fired. In 2006, Kotick allegedly harassed a female employee and left a voicemail saying he would have her killed. As the outlet reports, employees point to two key reasons for this behavior: a culture of drinking and the semi-autonomy each studio has from its parent company.

In response to *WSJ*’s story, Kotick issued a statement saying the story “paints an inaccurate and misleading view of our company, of me personally, and my leadership.”

“[What] I want to say is that anyone who doubts my conviction to be the most welcoming, inclusive workplace doesn’t really appreciate how important this is to me,” Kotick said. “As I have made clear, we are moving forward with a new zero tolerance policy for inappropriate behavior – and zero means zero. Any reprehensible conduct is simply unacceptable.”

Following the report, per *The Washington Post*, more than 500 Activision employees signed an open petition asking that Kotick remove himself as CEO. More than

MORE BIG NEWS FROM 2021

- Google shutters first-party Stadia development
- Lucasfilm Games comes back, EA no longer exclusive publisher
- Rockstar Games releases *Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy* in a broken and buggy state
- Sora released as final character in *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*
- CD Projekt Red delays new-gen versions of *Cyberpunk 2077*
- Valve announces portable PC console, Steam Deck
- Chris Pratt voicing Mario in the upcoming animated film, thankfully will not do an Italian accent
- Numerous video game companies jump on the NFT bandwagon

100 employees staged an in-person and online walkout. *The Post* also reported numerous Activision shareholders penned a letter asking the company's board of directors to have Kotick step down. In late November, *WSJ* reported Kotick told senior managers he would consider stepping down if he can't fix the cultural issues within Activision "with speed."

The revelations at Activision Blizzard are the latest of many examples of sexual misconduct in the gaming industry in recent years, as other companies like Ubisoft and Riot Games have also confronted similar issues. The Activision story is still ongoing, and how it all shakes out remains to be seen. For full details, we encourage you to go to GameInformer.com.

Return of the King

We knew Halo Infinite was coming out this year. What we didn't know was we'd be playing it a lot sooner than expected. And that it'd be all we talked about as 2021 came to a close.

Microsoft surprised the game industry by launching Infinite's

multiplayer beta on November 15 – nearly a month before the game's December 8 release date. You can read our review on page 70. In short: Infinite is excellent. It simultaneously feels old and new; if you played Halo in the past, you'll feel at home, but developer 343 Industries has also included enough new to make it feel fresh and modern. It's Halo at its best.

Infinite is all people in the gaming world are talking about right now. Scan Twitter and you're bound to see a plethora of people's thoughts, praises, and best clips from matches. It wasn't a completely smooth launch, however. Shortly after the beta went live in November, a fair number of players raised issues with its Battle Pass, which has been one of the main points of contention around Infinite's free-to-play multiplayer – specifically how leveling works, which is mostly based on completing in-match challenges. 343 quickly responded to backlash by updating the Battle Pass to dole out rewards quicker and is continuing to make changes.

That aside, Infinite's success is a

big win for both Microsoft and 343; within eight hours of launch, as reported by *Video Games Chronicle*, it had more than 270,000 concurrent players on Steam alone. A huge number, no matter how you slice it.

The success comes after both *Battlefield 2042* and *Call of Duty: Vanguard*, two ostensible titans of the 2021 release calendar, fell short. In our 2042 review we note the game's technical issues, saying it "currently feels underbaked." While Vanguard doesn't have the same problems, it is coming out as publisher Activision is embroiled in scandal (see previous section). Moreover, the game's campaign failed to impress many critics – including ours, who said it was "easy to skip." According to NPD sales data, Vanguard was November 2021's best selling game, becoming the second best selling game of the year.

With 2042 and Vanguard not posing much threat – and considering Infinite's multiplayer is *free* – 2021 is now the year of Halo. Case in point: flip to page 44.

Beyond

Where 2022 takes the industry, we'll have to wait and see. If we had to make some guesses, though, it's likely COVID will very much still be a factor. We'll almost certainly be still learning about Activision, and the industry is likely to continue its reckoning against misconduct. Microsoft and Tencent will ostensibly spend more money. And as more new-gen consoles get into the hands of players, we'll continue to see the rise of a new generation of gaming hardware and software. And at least in the immediate term, we'll still be playing Halo. That much we can likely bet on. ■





TOP FIVE

EXCELSIOR!

The Marvel Comics characters we want to see star in their own games

BY ANDREW REINER

1 Imagine exploring Wakanda as **Black Panther**, learning of its culture, embracing its innovative technologies, and defending it from invaders like Thanos' legion. We see Black Panther as an open-world experience similar in design to the Assassin's Creed series.

2 Insomniac Games already reused Spider-Man's New York City map for a Miles Morales game, so why not do it again for **Daredevil**? Sound-based detective work, billy-club city swinging, and showdowns with Kingpin and Bullseye are in order.

3 Fans of the MCU learned how powerful **Scarlet Witch** is when she fabricated a city. We could see her controlling like a Jedi, throwing enemies around with the wave of a hand, yet having the mobility of a god being able to fly across the world.

4 Given where destructibility is in games today, we need a character who can level cities in no time flat and we think **She-Hulk** is more than capable of serving up fun disaster scenarios.

5 Seeing that actor Simu Liu is a huge video game player, we have a feeling he'd love reprising his role of a martial arts master in a **Shang-Chi** video game. Open world. Combo-driven combat. High environmental interactions. It sounds too good to be true. ■

THE TOP ONGOING GAMES OF 2021

Many of us vest hundreds of hours into games that released years ago. These titles are continually updated and essentially made new again with fresh experiences, quests, and unlocks. Here are the three ongoing games that had the strongest allure in 2021.

BY ANDREW REINER

1 FINAL FANTASY XIV

From its 2013 rebirth in *Realm Reborn*, Final Fantasy XIV keeps getting better as it goes. Updates have been so good that demand is through the roof. Square Enix's inability to accommodate the rapidly growing player base has led to long server queues and the game somehow selling out digitally.

This year's big expansion, *Endwalker*, offers a conclusion to Final Fantasy XIV's long-running story between the forces of light and darkness, and is once again backed by gorgeous visuals, excellent character development, and some of the best team-based combat out there. Final Fantasy XIV was called one of the worst MMO experiences ever when it launched, but after being redesigned and updated in big ways, is now the MMO to beat.

2 FORTNITE

No game comes close to topping Fortnite in terms of sheer content. Just logging in once a day can bring unexpected surprises. A story-based event could lead to the game world changing mid-match and a new villain appearing. A well-traveled location could suddenly offer a new quest leading to a shocking licensed character reveal. Over the course of this year, Epic Games has offered skins from Marvel, DC, *Star Wars*, *Alien*, *Ghostbusters*, *Avatar*, and more. It has one of the largest rosters of characters (if not the largest) in gaming history.

Epic Games also isn't afraid to take chances with gameplay, often shaking up the arsenal every season and even asking players to journey through single-player content to help the story develop.

3 NO-MAN'S SKY

What once started as a lonely universe to explore has become one of the richest science-fiction experiences out there. Since it launched, developer Hello Games has added cooperative play, base building, NPC settlements, mechs, new alien species, and story-based quests galore. No Man's Sky is also one of the most rewarding VR experiences available, offering the entire experience from a more intimate perspective.

2021 was a huge year for No Man's Sky with a steady drip of meaningful content like expeditions and companions. It doesn't appear Hello Games will be stopping any time soon and will continue to turn No Man's Sky into an even more robust and rewarding survival game. ■



EXPENSIVE WHEELS

Earlier this year, Square Enix brought back a popular crossover event that added Noctis' outfit and his stylish Regalia car from Final Fantasy XV. This was the second time since 2019 that this awesome event has been available. Players must work to get the Regalia, which goes for 200,000 MGP.



AS YOU WISH

Disney and Epic Games are once again partnering to bring *Star Wars* back to Fortnite, this time with Boba Fett, just in time for the launch of the new Disney+ series. His bounty hunter friend, Fennec Shand, is also being teased as an addition to the battle royale.



IT WAS A GREAT RIDE

To celebrate the launch of *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*, Hello Games added Commander Shepard's SSV *Normandy SR1* to No Man's Sky. The iconic vessel was only in the game for 10 days in May but was brought back again for a short period in November. Here's hoping it returns in 2022.



THE SLASHER IS ALIVE AND WELL

Dead by Daylight is an asymmetrical game success story, pitting an evil killer against four survivors in each match, with no battle ever playing out exactly the same. In 2021, a powerful blend of new additions to the roster gave players amazing licensed characters from *Resident Evil* and *Hellraiser*, making those horror fantasy dreams of Leon S. Kennedy running from Pinhead a reality.

Developer Behaviour Interactive also continues to innovate with interesting designs, adding its own properties to the mix like a knife-throwing K-pop superstar and a terrifying ink-blasting artist. On top of all that, more maps, features, abilities, and other additions are constantly coming to keep killers and survivors scrambling for new strategies. While balancing this deadly game of hide-and-seek is challenging, it's always a blast queuing up for scare after scare. **BY DAN TACK**



1

For the
audiophile

GEAR

LISTEN UP

Headsets to take your audio game
to the next level **BY MATT MILLER**

Many new-gen games support dramatically expanded audio options, including spatial audio that helps take the step past traditional surround sound. While a high-end speaker system can often help you enjoy those experiences, it can also be costly and doesn't help solve for multiplayer chatting. That means your best bet for high-end audio is likely a robust headset. If you're aiming to get the most out of new-gen audio, the lowest cost options aren't likely to wow you. When you're ready to step up into something a bit more impressive, we've got some recommendations.

1 VZR MODEL ONE

If you're willing to pony up the cash, VZR's new wired gaming headset offers the sort of performance and sound production you'd find in some higher-end studio headphones but tuned and built with gaming in mind. The proprietary CrossWave tech leads to immaculate sound production by imitating how sound waves enter your ear in a natural setting. In-game sound is exceptionally crisp, natural, and balanced but doesn't overwhelm with bass the way some headsets do. Music (whether game soundtracks or just your Spotify playlist) sounds terrific. Despite being slightly heavier than some headsets, the Model One also earns especially high marks for comfort, thanks to an auto-adjusting band and ultra-comfortable over-ear cans that create a snug fit without squeeze. A high-quality boom or inline mic option is included, and the wired cabling works with just about any platform on which you'd like to play. The only real knock is the absence of a built-in volume adjustment, but for high-end sound while gaming, this is a triumph.

\$349 | vzraudio.com



2

Best for
customizers

2 ASTRO A40 TR CUSTOM

If you spend hours customizing your character in every RPG you play, there's no reason you shouldn't take the same effort to design what's sitting on your head. Astro's customization options are second to none, letting you spec out the color, tags, headband, and more, ensuring that you can make your headset unique – with more modding available at an additional cost. Astro also has an established history for strong performance audio in its headsets, and the A40 TR is no exception. It offers strong bass performance that makes car engines roar and shotgun blasts pop, and, like the EPOS described to the right, also features an open back (it's moddable to closed at additional cost, if desired). While the primarily plastic materials don't scream high-end, the headset is comfortable and flexes well to different head sizes. The boom mic is especially good, with clean capture but without picking up too much ambient noise. The power of the A40 TR can be expanded and made more flexible with the sold-separately Astro MixAmp. If you want the performance without the customization, the A40 TR is also available in some preset designs for slightly less.

\$199 | astrogaming.com

3

Open-backed for "live" sound

Strong audio on a budget



3 EPOS H6PRO OPEN ACOUSTIC

If you've struggled to find a headset that sounds authentic but doesn't lead to fatigue or head sweats, the missing option you may not have tried is an open-backed design. Your friend who used to work in a record store can regale you with the myriad differences between open and closed-back designs. But the big takeaway is that an open back allows for air ventilation, letting your ears breathe, and getting a more expansive soundscape – especially gratifying in open-world or other large-environment games. The wired H6PRO Open is supremely comfortable, and the sound quality is balanced and rewarding, with a handy volume dial right on the outer ear cup. The detachable boom mic does its job well and can be flipped up for a quick mute or removed entirely to slim down the design if you prefer your own standalone mic. Like all open-backed headsets, this isn't the best option for playing in loud spaces, and there's some sound bleed to those who may be nearby. But for your otherwise quiet and private gaming space, it may open your eyes to a new way of listening.

\$179 | eposaudio.com

4 HYPERX CLOUD CORE + 7.1

HyperX has a strong rep for providing satisfying audio performance at a reasonable price. The new Cloud Core + 7.1 Surround provides a solid choice if higher-priced audio solutions are not in the cards. The headset is light, even with some metal bands adding a more solid feel. Sound quality is also good; while bass output is limited, games tested sounded crisp and clear regardless of platform. On PC, the set plugs into an included USB hub to manage both ear and mic volume separately, as well as the virtual surround sound functionality. But you won't have those customization options on console, where you plug directly into the controller. The detachable boom mic is the biggest sacrifice, as it felt only serviceable for game or other voice chat, often coming through a bit too quiet. Still, this new Cloud Core + 7.1 is a superb headset at this price point and an easy recommendation if you're trying to keep your audio investment manageable. ■

\$69.99 | hyperx.com

4

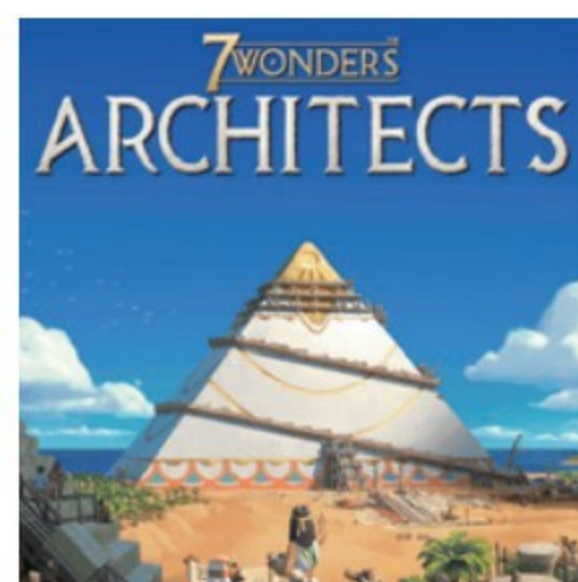


THE BEST BOARD GAMES OF 2021

BY MATT MILLER

Whether getting together with old friends, or settling down for a weekly family game night, great tabletop games bring people together and create lasting memories. Here are 10 of the very best games of 2021, from cooperative party experiences to challenging asymmetric strategy competitions, and everything in-between.

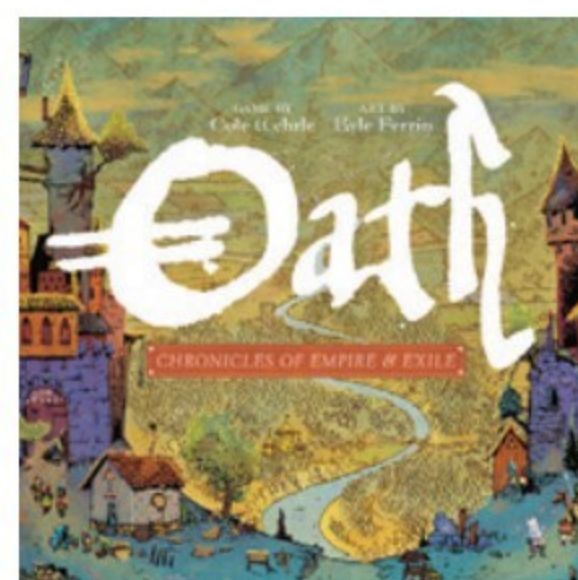
Discover more of the best tabletop games of 2021, including a round-up of the best role-playing game products of the year, at GameInformer.com/topofthetable



7 Wonders Architects

Publisher: Repos Production

The original 7 Wonders is phenomenal, but its manifold strategies can intimidate newcomers. Architects simplifies and streamlines without losing the core fun. Players work to build a wonder of the ancient world using a straightforward card selection as the central mechanic. Attractive cardboard pieces represent the landmark as it takes shape. Add in the playful art and cleverly designed components, and Architects claims a spot as one of the best new gateway games in years.



Oath: Chronicles of Empire and Exile

Publisher: Leder Games

Leder Games is known for asymmetric game design, where each player can leverage different abilities to win. Oath charts the course of a sprawling empire, and each player takes on a role in that complex mix, from the ruling chancellor to exiled revolutionaries looking to topple the regime. In a fascinating twist, the results of one game establish the start-up conditions for the next time it's played, sometimes even introducing new cards and situations.



Ankh: Gods of Egypt

Publisher: CMON

Following on the heels of its myth-focused predecessors, Blood Rage and Rising Sun, this sumptuous strategy game casts players as Egyptian gods, struggling to remain relevant as the old ways of worship fall away. Asymmetric powers, non-random combat, and a tense, tight map of area control lead to fierce confrontation. The fantastical artwork and immaculate miniature sculpts capture the imagination in a way few other games can.



Descent: Legends of the Dark

Publisher: Fantasy Flight Games

Don't be fooled by the name; the massive new entry in the Descent franchise is a standalone dungeon-crawling experience, separate from earlier games. Featuring 3D tile set-ups and a digital app that doubles in function, running the game and telling the story, this is an impressive cooperative fantasy adventure filled with combat and upgrades, perfect for groups looking for a months-long gaming night go-to.



Machi Koro 2

Publisher: Pandasaurus Games

Small but important changes update this popular family-friendly city building game. Players compete to build a city of bakeries, stadiums, and gardens, establishing landmarks and setting each urban center apart. Brisk playtimes and easy-to-learn rules make it an easy pick-up-and-play experience, but one with significant luck factoring in. Pre-game strategy and greater replayability than the original make this the definitive version, and an easy choice for a light night of gaming.



Merchants of the Dark Road

Publisher: Elf Creek Games

One of the most innovative releases in recent months, Elf Creek Games' newest game is a fantasy adventure in which intrepid merchant caravans must brave the night, deliver goods, and recruit heroes between isolated cities. Players need to balance prestige and money acquisition to win the game, and success demands you always think three steps ahead. Richly imagined and lavishly illustrated, this is a great fit if you're looking for a novel new twist on tabletop strategy, awash in fantasy styling.



Sleeping Gods

Publisher: Red Raven Games

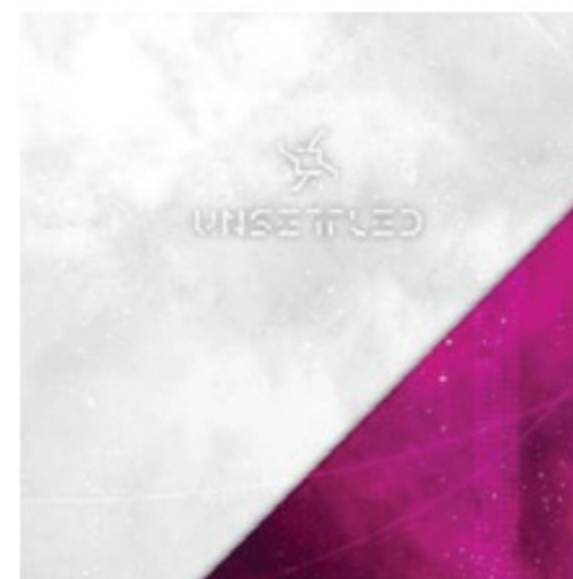
This stunning campaign game follows the crew of a 1929 steamship as it navigates mysterious waters and lands, vanquishing monsters, tracking down hidden totems, and trying to find a way home. A spiral-bound atlas book is the board, opening up new vistas with each session, while an accompanying storybook fills out a rich narrative. Even after playing through a full campaign over many sessions, subsequent campaigns could play out entirely different – with over a dozen possible endings.



So Clover!

Publisher: Repos Production

Sometimes the simplest concepts are the most rewarding. So Clover! is a breezy cooperative party game of word association. Players arrange a selection of cards with random words onto a four-space grid, and then write down clue keywords that link specific words seen on the cards. Other players work together to try and arrange the grid in the correct orientation. Simple but surprisingly nuanced, this is one of those easy staples you can bring to the table whenever and please everyone.



Unsettled

Publisher: Orange Nebula

Sci-fi fans should take note of this incredible new game of exploration and survival, in which all players work together to confront the dangers of deep space, discover new worlds, chart mysterious anomalies, and advance science. Unsettled features a core game system and connected "planet boxes" that plug into that framework, each offering a standalone and unique experience. Deep, thematic, and complex, this is a cooperative adventure for experienced players looking for an engrossing and surprising play.

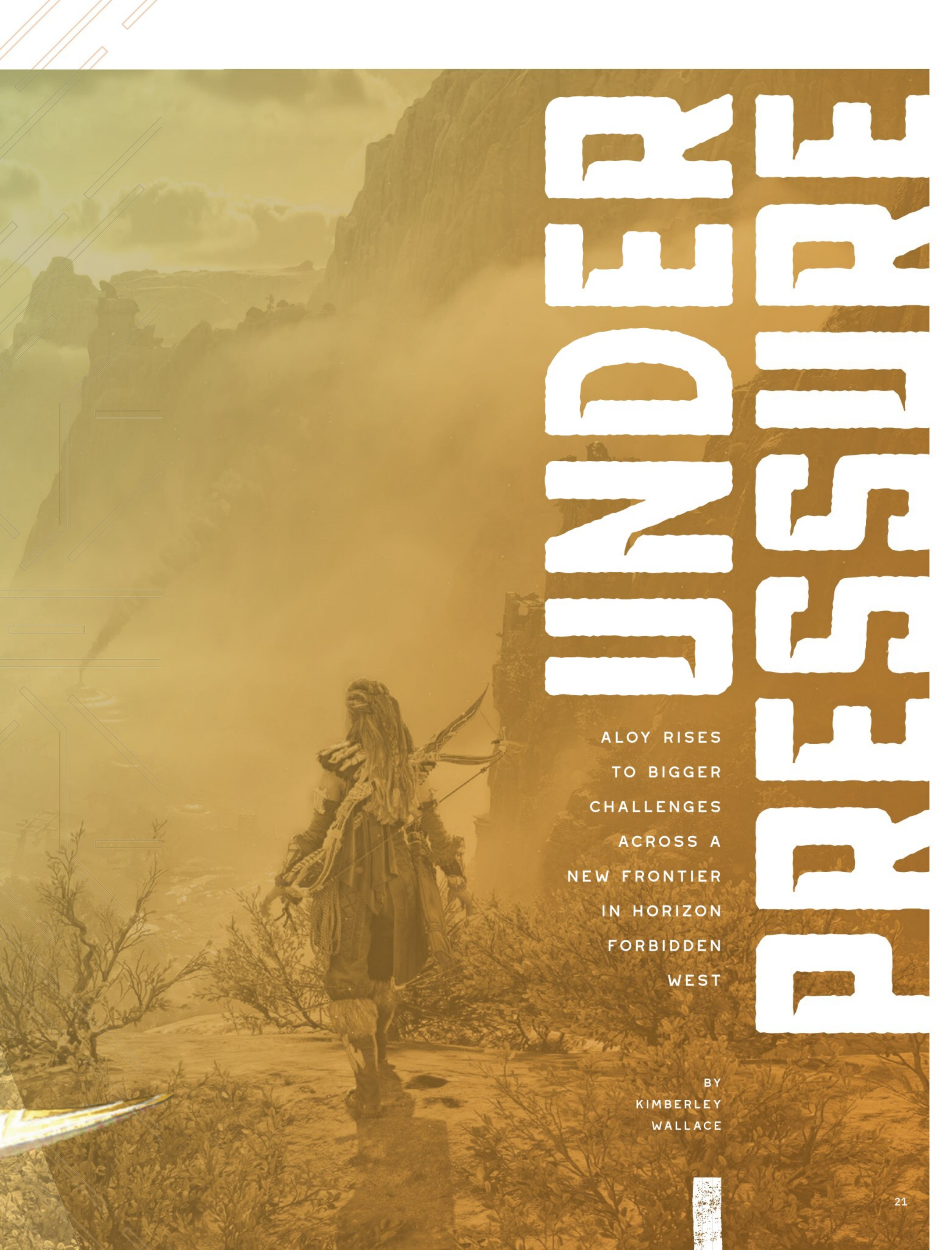


World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King

Publisher: Z-Man Games

The Pandemic games have a winning blueprint that has stood the test of time. In this new cooperative twist on the formula, the board gaming juggernaut franchise aligns with its first licensed partner, transporting players to Northrend and into the roles of Azeroth's heroes as they stand against the Lich King. A fun questing system demands teamwork, and each hero brings awesome unique powers to the table, leading to a climactic battle atop Icecrown Citadel to end Arthas' reign. ■



A full-page background image featuring Aloy from the game Horizon Forbidden West. She is standing in a vast, arid desert landscape with rocky cliffs and sparse vegetation. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting either sunrise or sunset. Aloy is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, looking out over the horizon. The right side of the page is dominated by large, white, stylized text that reads "Aloy Rises".

Aloy Rises

ALOY RISES
TO BIGGER
CHALLENGES
ACROSS A
NEW FRONTIER
IN HORIZON
FORBIDDEN
WEST

BY
KIMBERLEY
WALLACE

MUCH LIKE ALOY CHARGING FORTH ATOP AN EQUINE-ESQUE STRIDER TO ACHIEVE VICTORY,

Guerrilla Games won over gamers and critics alike with *Horizon Zero Dawn*, launching its reputation into the stratosphere.

And it all happened because Guerrilla Games chased its passions, exploring an idea that genuinely excited the team. That concept introduced players to a post-apocalyptic Earth where massive, animal-like machines have become a part of the ecosystem and humans live in pre-industrial tribes, unaware of the sophisticated civilization that preceded them.

Horizon Zero Dawn became one of the biggest success stories of 2017. Formerly known for the shooter franchise *Killzone*, Guerrilla Games took a risk by creating a new IP and tackling a new genre, something not common in the game industry for major developers. But it paid off big, and now Guerrilla wants to deliver a sequel that lives up to the high bar set by its predecessor.



PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 STYLE 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment DEVELOPER Guerrilla Games RELEASE February 18



In many ways, Guerrilla Games and protagonist Aloy are in similar positions as we head into Horizon Forbidden West – each having proved their worth. By mastering a new genre, Guerrilla Games demonstrated it is capable of breaking the mold. Aloy, with her ever-growing abilities and heroics, showed that this outcast had long been underestimated. Both over-delivered in their capabilities. Aloy didn't just help fight off a deadly wave of mechanical beasts, she became the world's savior, and unlocked secrets long kept hidden. Horizon Zero Dawn became one of the best games of 2017, eventually selling over 10 million copies and earning awards from the Writers Guild of America, D.I.C.E., and SXSW Gaming, to name a few.

Now both Aloy and Guerrilla are confronting the heightened expectations that come with success. With pressure rising as Forbidden West's release draws near, we spoke to Guerrilla Games about its journey and what's at stake for Aloy in the sequel. We also got to see how the developer takes Horizon's beloved gameplay to the next level in a hands-off demo.

NEW CHALLENGES ALL AROUND

Looking back on it now, Horizon's unique world seems like a no-brainer recipe for success, but Guerrilla Games had no idea it would become one of Sony's top brands, even if all signs were pointing that way. "To be honest, it was kind of a shock to us in a way, like how successful that game has become and how much love there is for the game," says game director Mathijs de Jonge. "And in a way, there's a lot of pressure to make a sequel for the game."

However, Guerrilla was always confident that it'd take Aloy's journey further than one game, with de Jonge calling a sequel "inevitable." The team even teased more was to come at the end of Zero Dawn, showing the world still had greater mysteries to unravel. Aloy may have found some answers, but with them, came more

questions. "We had a bigger arc already in mind for a long time," de Jonge confirms. "But also going to the Forbidden West, the Forbidden West was already mentioned in the first game. And just the sense of mystery, the sense of danger that the title alone already kind of communicates, is something that inspired us as well to say, 'Okay, what does that mean ... Forbidden West? What kind of mysteries do we have?' That was a big important starting point for us."

Trailers show Aloy traveling westward, with San Francisco a confirmed locale in the game, but the dangers and challenges are much greater since we last saw her. Six months after the events of Horizon Zero Dawn, Aloy is on a mission to stop a mysterious red blight before it renders the world uninhabitable. Her journey looks difficult, as footage also teases a dangerous incoming storm and rival tribes that can also mount machines standing in her way. And just like Guerrilla Games, Aloy's also feeling the pressure. She's no longer an outcast scoffed at by others. She's treated as a savior, put on a pedestal. "It's a lot of pressure, and that pressure just gets more and more intense as the game goes on," says narrative director Benjamin McCaw. "It actually winds up being a big part of her arc as a character ... this idea of carrying the world on her shoulders."

For Horizon Forbidden West, Guerrilla Games hasn't lost its enthusiasm for Aloy and the world she inhabits. In fact, even at the start of the project, the team overflowed with possible improvements for her adventure and ways to make the world even richer. "There were already a lot of ideas for new weapons and new machines, stuff that we couldn't fit into the first game, but that we were just excited to play around with," de Jonge says. According to de Jonge, the team really focused on improving traversal and melee.

"On the story side, one area that we definitely put a lot of emphasis on is side quests and companion characters," adds McCaw. "That was something we picked up on from the first game that could be improved, and we've worked really hard to do that."



A NEW SKILL TREE

The skill tree has been completely revamped in Forbidden West, now featuring six different playstyles: warrior [melee], trapper [placing/disarming traps], hunter [ranged weapons], survivor [health/resource], infiltrator [stealth], and machine master [hacking]. “They each specialize in [specific areas], but you can mix and match and play whatever you like in this game; it doesn’t really matter,” says game director Mathijs de Jonge.

Getting a quick glance at the skill trees gives an idea of the depth and wealth of options available. It appears each specialization has approximately 20 to 30 skills. The trees offer a mix of active skills, like using fewer resources in crafting, and passive boosts, like low health regen. Each tree also has its own unique Valor Surge, which are new special skills that can be executed once you fill up a meter by playing tactfully. In our demo, we spot the Powershots Valor Surge, which ups your shot damage and can be leveled up for even greater effect.

In addition, certain boosts and skills can be upgraded to higher levels to raise their effectiveness. However, the biggest game-changer is the outfit and weave boosts, which can take certain skills past their level cap, raising some stats 300-percent. “Combining the outfits with the skills pushes it really far,” de Jonge says, teasing that high-tier armor makes this even more satisfying

HEADING TO NEW PLACES, MEETING NEW FACES

Our first demo takes place early in the game in an area called the Daunt, a canyon at the eastern edge of the Sundom (Carja territory). This new settlement acts as an onboarding area to get players up to speed with the game’s new mechanics. “It’s the last stop before the dangerous frontier of the Forbidden West,” McCaw explains. “[Aloy’s] goal is to reach the border and attend an embassy near the fortress of Barren Light with a hostile tribe from the West, hopefully to attain rite of passage through their lands.” As usual for Aloy, things are more complicated than she’d like.

The snowy terrain and mountains make the Daunt harrowing to access on the best of days, but today the guard, Karhn, informs Aloy this valley is infested with machines. On the ledge above, she peers down and sees the machines glow and hears their movements. Aloy remains confident in her abilities, telling Karhn, “I can handle machines.” Karhn assures her he believes her but says he’s under instructions not to operate the cable car. Aloy isn’t having any of that, saying she’ll crank the car down herself if she must. The guard realizes someone has to go with her to crank it back up, so he gives in, telling her if anyone asks, she forced him, which is kind of true.

We get our first scenic view as the cart ziplines down into the valley – breathtaking mountains lay in the distance, and trees span for miles. Aloy notes the smoke in the air, which Karhn thinks is from something the machines wrecked, but there’s not much activity to be found as a work stoppage is in effect due to the dangerous machines running amok. Karhn notes the new nasty mechanical warthog-like foes are called Bristlebacks, and they’re not native to the Daunt, but interlopers showing up and wreaking havoc. Bristlebacks travel in herds, using their tusks to dig up resources. And you don’t want to get on their bad side, as they can unearth scrap and augment it with elemental material for use in ranged and melee attacks.

You still save at campfires, but now fast travel is free once you unlock a locale





Companions fight alongside you in certain battles, throwing out ammo if you need it

Aloy also learns the Carja Sun-Priest has shown up ahead of her, which may complicate things; he's the one who's supposed to run the Embassy at Barren Light. When she reaches the ground, the priest isn't exactly welcoming, calling Aloy a savage and noting her Nora origins. With a flick of his wrist, he tells her, "Aside, scalawag!" But his associate informs him that this is Aloy, the Savior of Meridian. The exchange is our first glimpse at some of the upgrades to the cinematics, which include full-motion capture and better facial animations. I notice it most in how much Aloy can now say simply with her eyes, whether it's confidence or hesitation.

The stubborn priest refuses to head to Barren Light until the captain confirms the way is clear. Aloy notes that the captain is a friend of hers, and then asks for the location of Erend, a character we met in *Zero Dawn*. Clearly annoyed by the priest's superiority complex, Aloy shushes him before he can get another word in. She'll just have to help move things along faster, so she asks where she can upgrade her gear to stand a better chance against the army of machines and find her longtime friend Erend. She's pointed to a workbench in a nearby town named Chainscape and is told to craft some acid arrows to make fast work of the Bristlebacks and canisters on their backs. Detonate the latter, and you trigger a large elemental explosion.

However, it's not long until we run into danger and confront a new enemy that can tunnel underground called Burrowers. These baddies also emit high-pitched sounds to alert allies and stun their prey. "We wanted to add even more character and locomotion to the machines in *Horizon Forbidden West*, so the Burrowers are very similar to otters or weasels: flexible, quick, and pretty ferocious," de Jonge says.

It's here that Guerrilla demonstrates a new focus scan feature at Aloy's disposal, allowing her to analyze Burrowers and cycle through their components. The scan reveals the beasts are weak to fire, have a detachable Burrower Soundshell, and that their eye is a weak spot. This feature conveys a lot of different information, from letting you know if a machine contains a key upgrade resource to if a part is indestructible. For now, we stealth our way past. No need to fight if we don't have to.

Our journey to Chainscape has some familiar sights for those with a keen eye. According to de Jonge, the area is based on Zion National Park, a southwest Utah nature preserve known for its steep red cliffs. In our cable car ride, we also passed Angels Landing, a 1,488-foot-tall rock formation, popular for its renowned trail that rewards hikers with panoramic views of Zion Canyon.







You can now use Aloy's focus ability to highlight climbing and grapple points in the environment

A FAMILIAR FACE

As Aloy approaches Chainscape, the guards roll out the red carpet, constantly addressing her as “Savior.” Aloy enters through the gate and spots a familiar face: Petra, an inventor from the Oseram tribe. In *Zero Dawn*, Petra hired Aloy to help get valuable parts back from bandits, which in turn led to a big battle and the invention of her Oseram Cannon. And yes, she’s still pretty flirty with Aloy, slyly saying, “About time there was something worth looking at in this dump.”

Petra takes Aloy toward the brewery, hoping to catch up over a drink, but Aloy is anxious to get out west and not abandon her mission. This scene showcases the push and pull between Aloy’s pressing need to complete her main mission versus honoring the needs of her friends, something that is a constant battle for Aloy

and plays into the game’s larger themes. “On one level, Aloy really wants to live up to the example of Elisabet Sobeck, her mother figure, and do whatever it takes to stop the blight and save the world. Even if that means doing it single-handedly,” McCaw says. “But she’ll also discover that it’s lonely being a Savior. And ultimately, it’s the connections with others that make the world worth saving in the first place.”

The scene ends with Petra saying she understands that Aloy needs to move on and has “bigger gears to grind,” but still leaves the invitation on the table: “But if you want a cold beer and a few laughs with an old friend, come find me at the brewery, your choice.” It’s clear from the exchange that Aloy is torn, even second-guessing herself, noting that it looks like Petra could use some support with a shady character named Ulvund. However, she still has her eye on that workbench to upgrade her bow, putting that as her first priority.

As we search through the settlement, it’s obvious Guerrilla added some enhancements to the world – not just in detail and superior graphics, but also in making it feel more lived in. “We’ve upgraded our civilians and settlements since the last game with an improved crowd system, better animations, and much better audio,” McCaw says. “So everything should feel a little bit more authentic and lifelike.”

We see this firsthand when we enter the tavern: the crowded establishment is full of chatter, groups blowing off steam and eating food. At one point, we hear a man slurring his words, “Has anyone seen where I put my drink?” Heading toward the back of the building, patrons are banging on the table, drunkenly singing, “Don’t recall last night, but all I know for sure is it was worth it, worth it!” As we leave the bar, the song can still be heard playing in the background. “We’ve made these nice transitions where the NPC world things are actually gelling very nicely with the music that plays over the game,” de Jonge says.

As we further explore the area, a variety of side content beckons to us, whether it’s companion quests or side activities. We get a small glimpse at melee pits, a new activity intended to help players learn combo moves. Melee pits offer challenges to test your skills, but most importantly, they also provide step-by-step tutorials from trainers on how to chain certain combos. “There’s also a cool little story hook into the melee pits as well,” McCaw teases.

McCaw also talks about the efforts that went into improving the story for side quests and companion characters, hoping players forge stronger bonds with secondary characters in *Forbidden West*. “The big focus, though, that we wanted to change from the first game to the second, is that you just get to spend more time with key characters,” he says. “That’s something we tried to do consistently throughout the game. Not just for characters that you meet along the main quest, but also certain side quest characters; they don’t just go away after one quest.”

Both de Jonge and McCaw spoke to wanting players to feel more rewarded for engaging in side content. “There’s a lot more variety in that sense – a [better] sense of accomplishment that you actually get something cool in return for doing these quests,” de Jonge says. “That was another part where we felt like we had some room for improvement. So you get a cool weapon, or you get a cool outfit, something that’s really useful for your next quest or activity.”

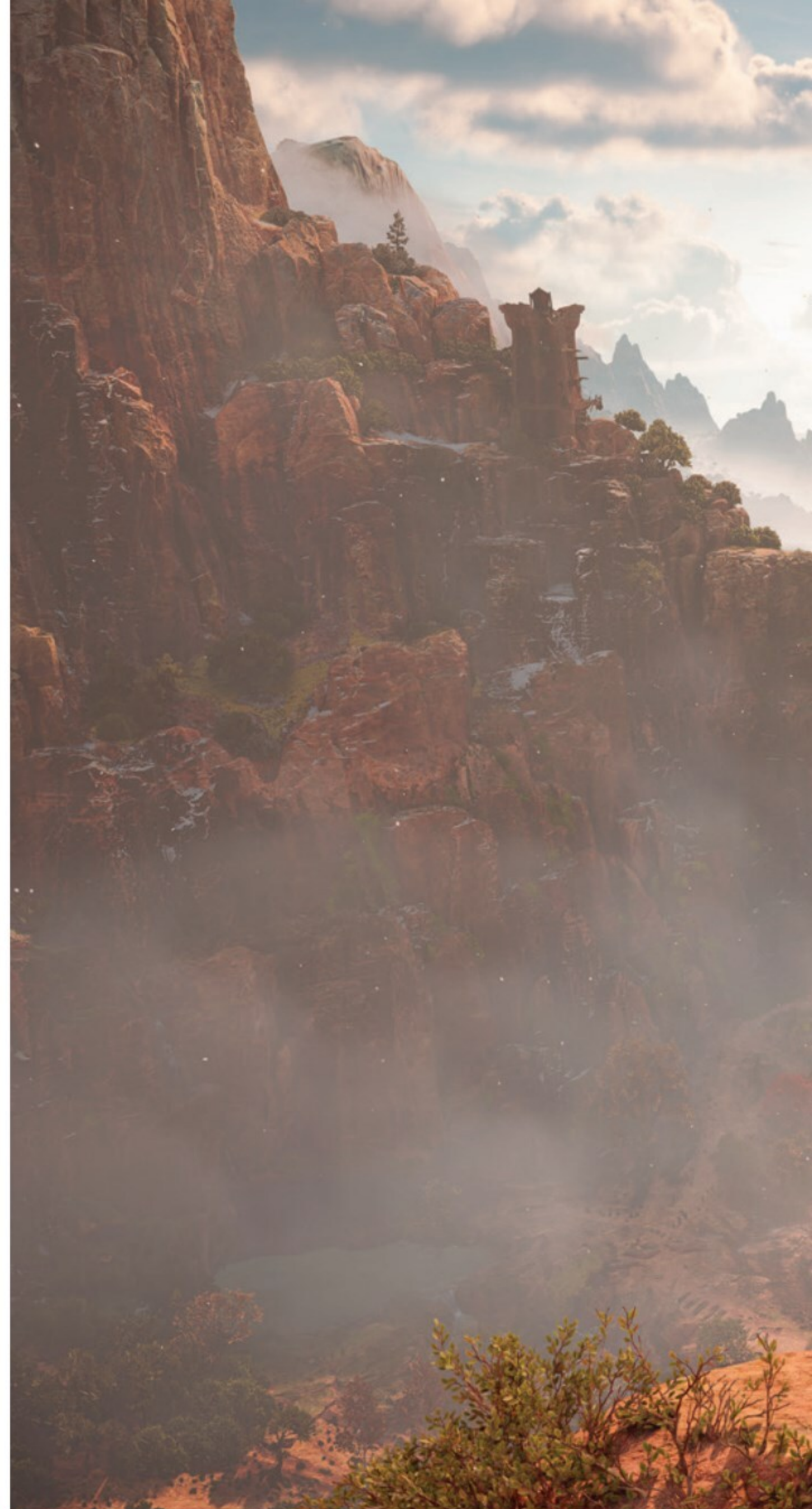


MORE ON THE WORKBENCH

The workbench is your one-stop upgrade shop, but you must find one. Ammo and trap crafting can be done out in the field and no longer requires you to find a merchant to re-up if you run out. As for the reasoning behind having upgrades tied to the workbench, Guerrilla said it's all about drawing people to content, reminding them to upgrade, and looking for new merchant items.

"We were looking at how to make settlements more interesting and how we can add more interactivity to settlements, so they become like safe havens for the player," says game director Mathijs de Jonge.

"Settlements are also hubs for all kinds of different content in the game as well," adds narrative director Benjamin McCaw. "So, sort of drawing the player back to the workbenches makes a lot of sense because you become aware of quests and activities, and even activities within the settlements."





TINKERING WITH THE WORKBENCH

After our jovial foray into the tavern, we finally find the workbench [see “More On The Workbench” sidebar], a new feature in *Forbidden West*. At workbenches, you can upgrade weapons, outfits, and pouches as well as craft traps, potions, and special gear. We take out our common bow, which has three levels of upgrades. Upgrading it one level grants us a new ammo type and increased weapon stats. This is how we unlock acid arrows to help us with those pesky Bristlebacks. The costs to upgrade are listed, and de Jonge says this time around it won’t be just about metal shards like in *Zero Dawn*: “In this game, we tried to bring encounters with the machines more into play. A lot of these upgrades also cost specific machine resources, so you have to go out and hunt specific machines.”

Outfits work like weapons, which can have anywhere from three to five upgrades. Upgrading an outfit mostly increases its

resistances, but another cool aspect is that it can also improve skills you unlock on the skill tree [see sidebar], like concentration regen and potent medicine. “You can maximize the skill value by combining the outfit with the skills that you’ve bought,” de Jonge says. You also have weaves, which can be equipped on outfits to improve their abilities.

The menu also shows the resource costs required for the upgrade. For Aloy’s current Nora Anointed armor, we need two Fanghorn Antlers. With a click of a button in the menu, you can now create a job to locate the resources required which will activate a quest and put a path on the map to where the machines holding them reside. Using this feature, we reach the designated area, and Aloy locates a Lancehorn, sporting the antlers for our bow’s upgrade. Aloy can also tag the parts to ensure they don’t get lost in the chaos when she shoots them off. And with some expert snipes to the antlers, we now have the parts to fully upgrade our bow, concluding our first demo.

A SLITHERY ADVERSARY

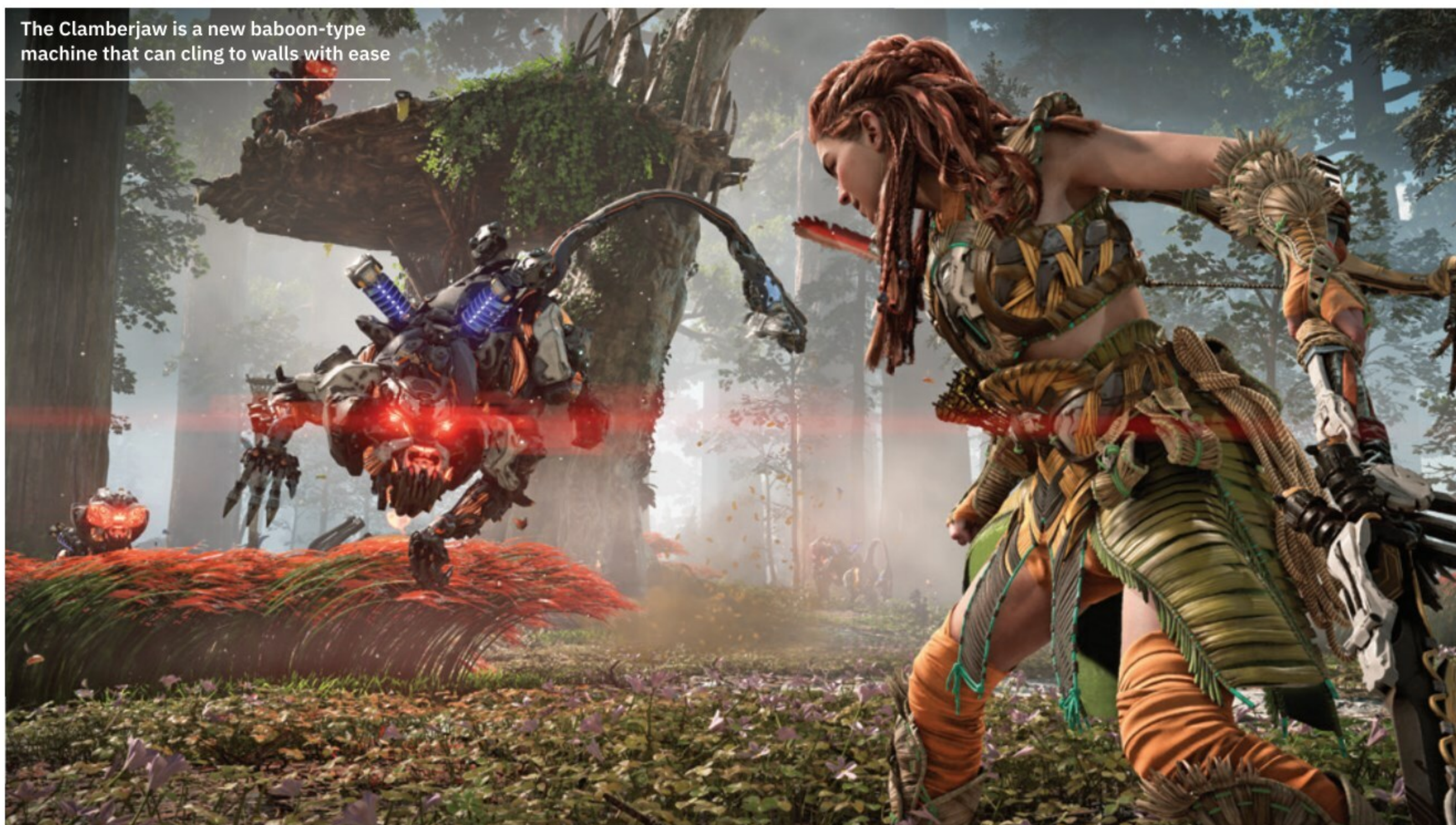
The fun exploration and mystery of the world is part of Horizon's appeal, but the fights against massive machines are hands-down the main attraction. Our second demo takes place much later in the game, showing off a variety of the different weapon techniques at Aloy's disposal.

For this section of the game, we're now in the Forbidden West; San Francisco, to be exact. Aloy has made a friend named Alva, a member of a mysterious new tribe. "[Alva's] bright and curious, but a little unsure of herself," McCaw says. Alva has recruited Aloy to help her find data that's crucial to the tribe. Their destination: the ruins of an old tech campus. The destination is a far cry from the wintry mountains we experienced in the Daunt; bright waters

and tropical vegetation abound. Aloy notes that Alva has come a long way since they first met, indicating they've spent some time around each other. Alva comments that she used to be terrified of a misstep, but that she's seen and learned a lot as of late. It's clear Alva has been reevaluating some things that have been taught, perhaps by her tribe, but we won't know her story until we play the full game.

Alva leads the way toward the quest destination. If you choose to go off the beaten path, you won't lose Alva or your quest progress; Alva merely waits for your return and acknowledges when you're back on the quest. As they get closer to the ruins, Alva asks Aloy why the ground is shaking, and we soon see the emergence of one gigantic python-like machine, which immediately begins spewing

The Clamberjaw is a new baboon-type machine that can cling to walls with ease



thick waves of venom Aloy and Alva's way. That's hardly the foe's only move, as a hard-to-avoid shock attack engulfs a great portion of the ground. The horrifying snake moves quickly through the sand, knocking down everything in its path, which in this case, is a lot of boulders and structures, annihilating the environment in front of us. Meet the Slitherfang, which Guerrilla says is based on the rattlesnake. To make a proper introduction, it wraps itself around a giant pillar to truly taunt you with its power.

There are many ways to gain an edge against this menacing reptile. For starters, fire arrows are a safe way for Aloy to hit one of the snake's elemental weaknesses and keep a distance. This is important as not only does the snake's electric attack cover a lot of ground, but it also launches sound blasts, which can stun Aloy, rendering her unable to fight for a few seconds. Aiming for its orange components can render some of its attacks useless, making that a wise target. Another key tool is the javelin thrower. It functions like a slingshot, with a shorter range, but it's worth the extra effort for its powerful piercing damage, especially when you unlock higher-tier weapon techniques. And if that's not your style, you can even shoot off the snake's electricity beam and use its own weapon against it. The creativity and flexibility in combat on display here is promising, giving players plenty of freedom in their strategies.

The snake will also change its attacks at certain points in the battle to throw you off. And if you think you can stand atop a structure and get an edge, think again. At one point, Aloy uses her grapple to get above her foe. However, the Slitherfang quickly takes note and launches its body toward the structure. To avoid damage, our demo shows Aloy using her new shield wing ability to glide to safer ground. It not only looks cool but has that exciting feeling of just getting away with something and doing it with grace.

Unfortunately, things are starting to turn more violent as the Slitherfang's health wears down, making it whip its massive tail



left and right to keep Aloy on her dodge game. To get through the fight, Aloy uses a mix of different arrow types, bombs, and spike throwers. However, to truly finish off the creature, she'll need to make use of her Valor Surge, which knocks back the enemy with shock damage. As the Slitherfang falls, Aloy says, "I'm going to have nightmares tonight," and so are we.

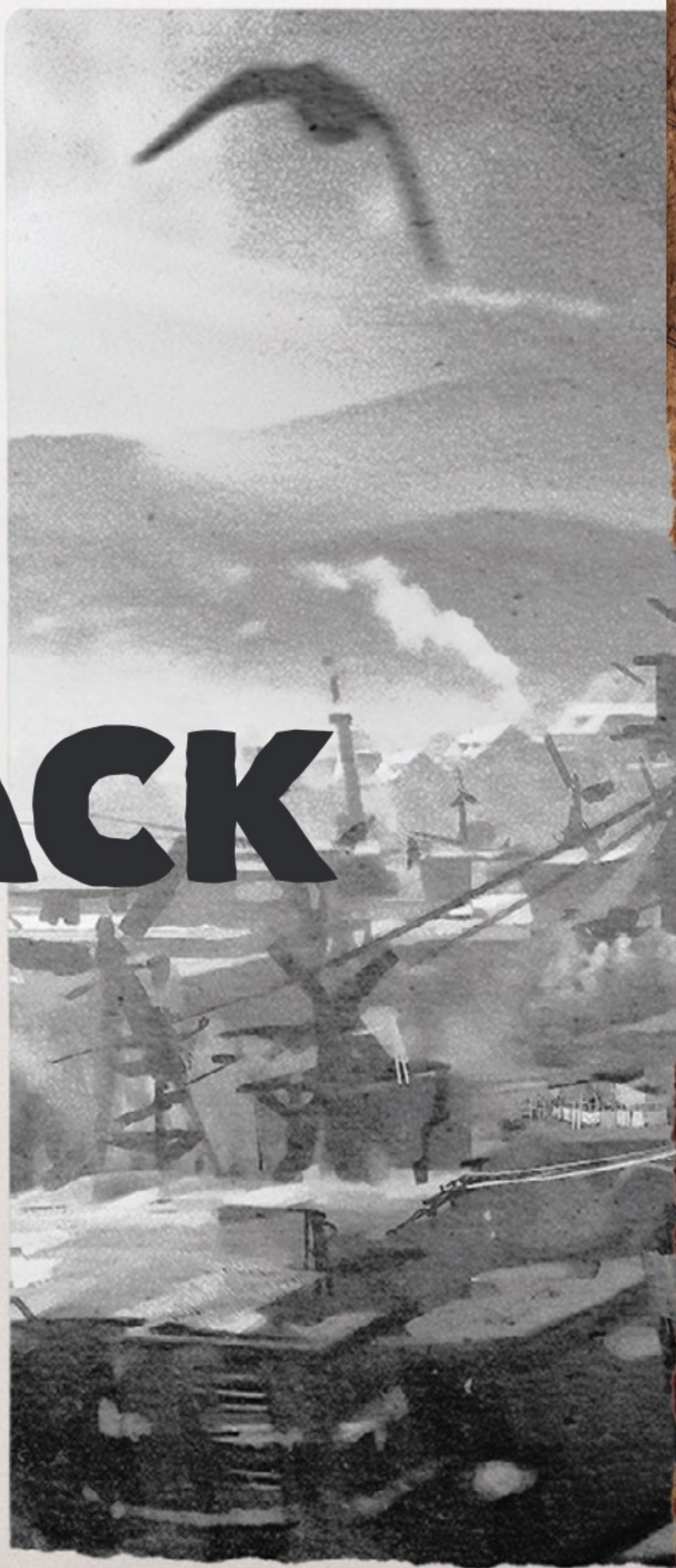
FLYING HIGH

Horizon Forbidden West looks to have all the components that made the first game special, with quality-of-life improvements and new features that take the series to new heights. Guerrilla Games already proved that Horizon was more than just a cool concept with Zero Dawn. The real challenge now lies in seeing if it can captivate the audience in new and exciting ways. We're most curious to see how the team at Guerrilla expands not only Aloy's story but the lore behind this fascinating world. Everything we saw had us even more eager to play the game when it hits in February, but let's be honest, that spectacular Slitherfang battle really set a high precedent for what's in store. ■

Want more details on Horizon Forbidden West? We have a whole month of dedicated coverage at gameinformer.com/forbiddenwest, where we dive deep into the new machines, Aloy's new tools, and more



BACK





FROM THE DEAD

Seven years after the first entry in the zombie-slaying, parkour-centric series, **Dying Light 2: Stay Human** finally shows signs of life

by BRIAN SHEA

F

Following a beyond-impressive showing at E3 2019, where it landed at #5 in *Game Informer*'s list of the most notable titles at the show, *Dying Light 2* went quiet. Initially scheduled for a spring 2020 release, the ambitious open-world zombie sequel, which promised to expand the scope, parkour abilities, and combat of the original while adding massive narrative choice and consequence mechanics, received a hefty delay near the start of the year.

Dying Light 2 didn't fully reemerge until mid-2021 through a series of videos from developer Techland. In May, the game received a new subtitle, "Stay Human," and a release date: December 7, 2021. Unfortunately, *Dying Light 2: Stay Human* hit another delay, this time into February 2022, to further polish the game and compensate for inefficiencies stemming from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

With so many setbacks at this point, it's understandable if you don't fully trust the February date set by Techland. However, after years of only seeing gameplay videos and trusting Techland that development was coming along nicely, I met with the studio, finally got my hands on *Dying Light 2*, and confirmed for myself that the project is nearing its home stretch.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC STYLE 1-Player Action (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Techland DEVELOPER Techland RELEASE February 4



Rebuilding the World Your Way

In the first *Dying Light*, you explored the quarantined city of Harran as Kyle Crane shortly after the initial zombie outbreak. Thanks to versatile first-person combat and parkour mechanics, players had the power to stand and fight against the hordes or climb to the roof and make a break for it using Crane's acrobatic free-running abilities. However, in stark contrast, players had little say in what happened when it came to the narrative.

In one late-game confrontation, primary antagonist Rais says, "All of this, and you still had your choice made for you." When





Venturing into the dark is even more terrifying this time around

I first played *Dying Light*, that didn't mean much to me. However, going back to it now, with the knowledge of *Dying Light 2*'s ambitions, that line sticks out as Techland unintentionally acknowledging the shortcoming of the series' debut.

That juxtaposition between gameplay and story isn't lost on Techland. "That was a part of the first pitch that creative director Adrian Ciszewski gave us as a team when we started working on *Dying Light 2: Stay Human*," says lead game designer Tymon Smektała. "Let's try to give players as much freedom in the narrative as they have in gameplay."



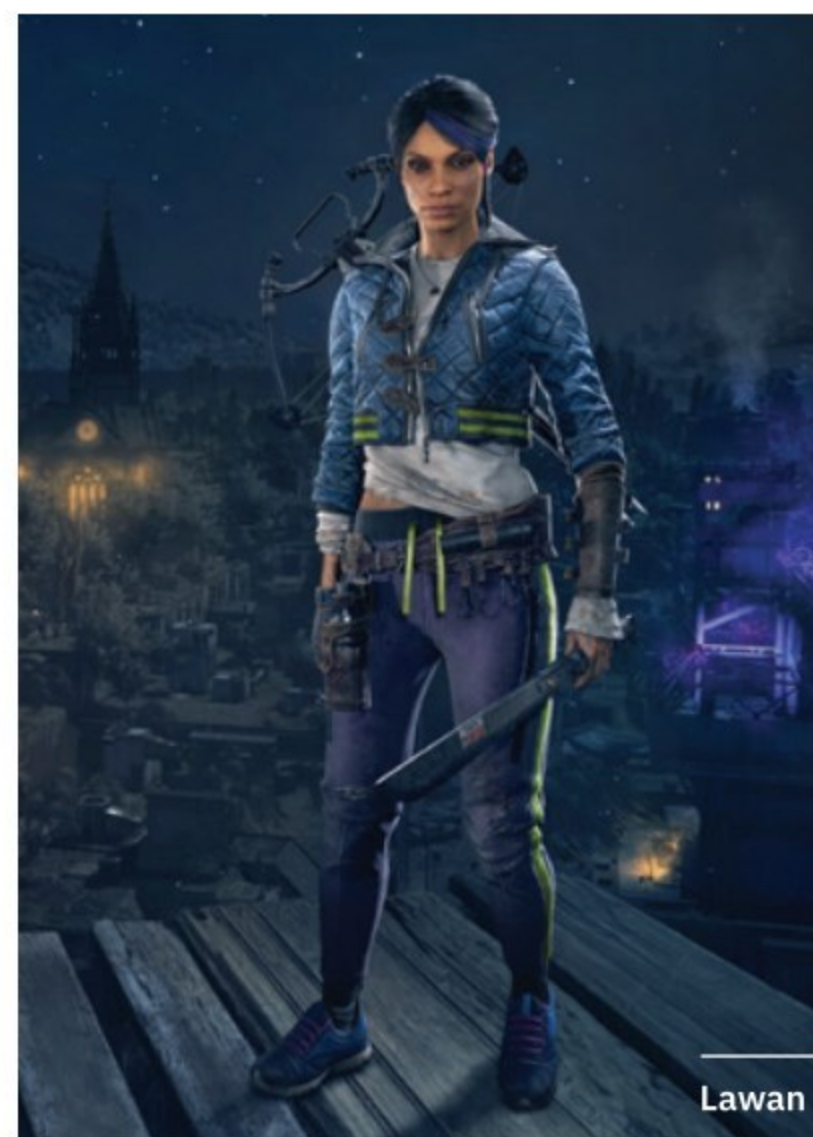
In the 20 years between the stories of these two games, *Dying Light*'s world has been turned on its head. After scientists attempted to weaponize the virus, a mutated strain escaped the lab, and within two years, the world lost 98 percent of its population. While a few settlements remain, only one human city is left: Villedor, or simply "The City," as it's come to be known.

In *Dying Light 2*, you assume the role of Aiden Caldwell, a nomad who comes to The City looking for his sister. To unlock the mystery of his past, Aiden needs to work with factions within The City. For example, one of the main missions in my demo is to get to Central Loop, the city center. The straightforward path is to secure safe passage through the Peacekeepers, a well-armed militia that uses brute force to fight for control, but I opt to help the Survivors, a faction centered on rebuilding.

LAST-GEN VIABILITY

I spent the bulk of my hands-on demo playing on a high-end gaming PC, but Techland also allowed me to experience the open world of *Dying Light 2* on a PS4 Pro. While other big releases have had bad performance on last-gen consoles, I was pleasantly surprised by how well the game ran on older hardware.

I wasn't able to play any missions or initiate dialogue with any NPCs on the PS4 build, but I did run through the open world, taking down a few zombies along the way. The most notable downgrade is the 30 frames-per-second performance instead of the 60 FPS I had on PC. But aside from some slightly muddier textures and some environmental objects popping in, I was happy with what I saw of the old-gen version.



Lawan

You can follow my choices or take a completely different route thanks to the game's new, in-depth choice mechanics.

"If you choose a different way, the first region of Villedor will look completely different," says narrative director Piotr Szymanek. "You will work with different people; the other group will be your enemies. It's fascinating that you can meet one NPC, and he can be your best buddy or ally or someone who can stab you in the back. This storyline in the first part of the game, you will have a big, completely different quest which will lead you to the place where you will finally have to confront those people who in another branch could be your friends."

In *Dying Light 2*, Techland fully embraces narrative choice and consequence. The developer says it instilled a deep system that allows players to leave their footprint on the game, evolving their unique story and city in three different layers. The first level consists of all the major decisions you make in the main story. These decisions impact the world, city, and characters, changing the very course of the narrative.

The second level stems from the side content, where you make decisions with characters, then later notice something related to that choice in the future; Smektała gives the example of an opera singer you can choose to help, and if you do, she'll appear in one of The City's hubs, singing arias. This may not sound like anything groundbreaking – games have been giving out tiny rewards like this for years – but when combined with the other two layers, Techland hopes it will provide players with an immersive experience that reacts to their choices.

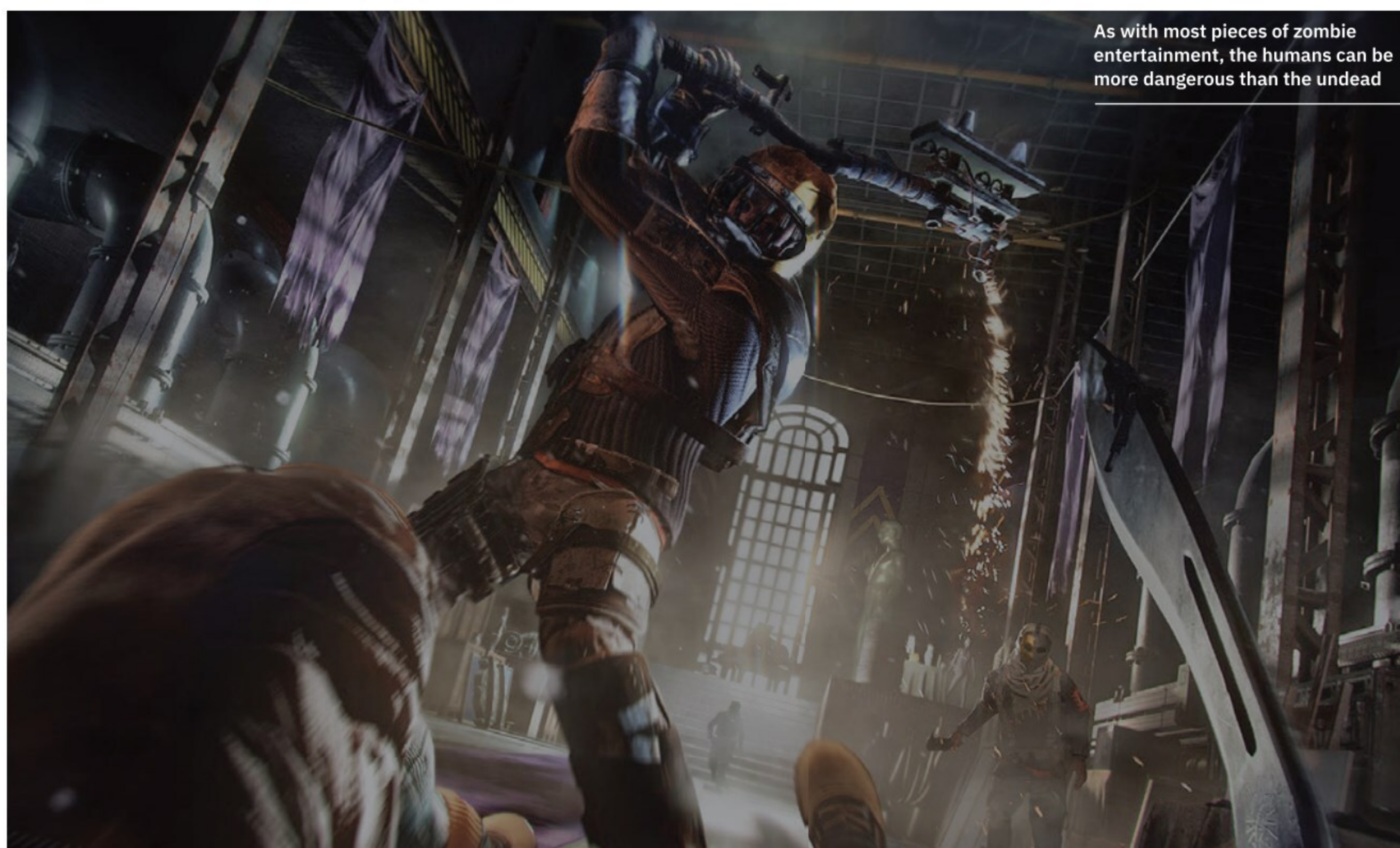
The final layer stacks on top of the first two and centers on how you decide to shape

The City through the game's alignment mechanics. Based on your choices, you align yourself with The City's different factions. In my demo, I side with the Survivors, which changes the alignment of the district to give them more control as I progress through my missions. In doing so, I open more ziplines, giving me more options to avoid descending into the zombie-infested streets. Had I sided with the Peacekeepers, I would have unlocked car traps for helping to control the undead hordes.

There are seven zones in which you can make these decisions, and there are seven levels of different rewards for each faction.

Every faction has unique benefits for aligning with them, and as you build your relationship, you earn more perks along the way. The result is a city that reacts to your various choices, even when you're acting outside of the main narrative.

These player-choice mechanics add to the fun first-person parkour and combat we experienced in the first *Dying Light* game. However, Techland wasn't satisfied with simply bringing those elements forward for *Dying Light 2*. It implemented various noteworthy improvements in those categories to create a better experience across the board.



As with most pieces of zombie entertainment, the humans can be more dangerous than the undead

DARKNESS DESCENDS

A big feature of the original *Dying Light* was that new, powerful zombie types emerge when the sun sets. While going out at night granted additional experience to players, Techland noticed most players just slept until morning to avoid the stress of dealing with the horrors of the dark. In *Dying Light 2: Stay Human*, Techland addresses that.

Techland built the world of *Dying Light 2* to push players to come out at night. If you go into an abandoned store or quarantine zone during

the day, it's flooded with zombie variants. However, the infected population is much sparser if you brave the nighttime streets and return to the same buildings after sunset. This provides a clearer path to loot valuables, including crafting parts, weapon mods, and the inhibitors that grant you extra stamina or health.

As with the first game, special zombie variants lurk in the shadows, and when the sun goes down, they spill into the streets. However, these

creatures aren't the only concern in your nighttime pursuits; Aiden can succumb to an illness if he's out of the light for too long. He can eat a special kind of mushroom to prolong waning immunity or upgrade the length of his immunity through character progression, but even if there are no zombies around, you don't want to waste time.

"We wanted this to be a metaphor for diving into the sea to get treasures from the bottom," says lead game designer Tymon Smektała.

"We kind of treated the dark places like this: You have a specific amount of immunity, which is kind of like your oxygen, and you dive into the dark place and try to get as much out of it as possible until your oxygen – your immunity – depletes."

If this sounds stressful, that's because that's how it's designed. Thankfully, you can approach many of the missions whenever you want to, but some missions require you to face the darkness, so don't breathe too big of a relieved sigh just yet.

Fight or Flight

As with the first game, *Dying Light 2* provides options in how to approach many of the encounters. While Kyle Crane was capable in both combat and parkour situations, Aiden Caldwell has even more abilities at his disposal. However, you must gain much of them through the skill trees. By leveling up Aiden, I unlock moves like wall-running and drop-kicks, both of which greatly enhance my experience.

In previous footage, Techland showed off moves like riding on doors as they open, using zombies as cushions when falling from tall heights, and grappling hooks. While I didn't get a chance to use any of those in my demo, the improvements to the parkour system in *Dying Light 2* are evident.

I witness the next evolution of the parkour systems as my demo progresses to Central Loop. There, I meet Lawan, played by Rosario Dawson (*The Mandalorian*, *Daredevil*). She gives Aiden a paraglider, which comes in handy in Central Loop, where the multi-story buildings of the first area I played through, Old Villedor, give way to massive skyscrapers. On top of a slow glide to the ground to cover great distances with ease, the paraglider can also use heat vents to push Aiden back up, letting him reach higher points and extend his glide time.

Techland doubled the number of moves available to the player to support the rebuilt parkour systems and implemented more than 3,000 animations to deal with all the combinations and interactions with objects. The team also rigorously iterated to ensure that the first-person platforming feels smooth, rewarding, and precise; Techland's



The drop-kick mechanic is immensely satisfying once you unlock it through the combat skill tree

goal is for players to feel like they are flowing through the environment.

The developer wanted to create a parkour system that's both approachable for a wide net of players, yet challenging to master. Through things like timed parkour challenges, players can push the system to the limit. However, *Dying Light 2*'s parkour aims to give players an accessible foundation, enabling them to expand their move set and get more skilled over time.

Combat may be a more straightforward mechanic in a first-person game, but Techland has also made marked improvements on that front. While stealth is an option in several cases (I quietly worked my way through one base with a bow, like how I would in a *Far Cry* game), combat has been overhauled to make weapons feel more faithful to their weight and power. I experience this in full force as I charge up a swing with a two-handed mace, then unload on a zombie, sending it flying in full, rag-doll glory. Combat also considers dodging, blocking, and parrying, but you must be careful not to deplete your stamina bar.

Regardless of how you approach situations, *Dying Light 2* looks to deliver moments that make your heart pound. When the game can do that, whether by enabling you to pull off the perfect parkour sequence or overcome being outnumbered in combat, it rises to its true potential.

Optimism in the Apocalypse

Dying Light 2: Stay Human has impressed at every turn. From that E3 2019 demo to the most recent gameplay footage released by Techland at the start of December, I've had little reason – outside of a sliding release date – to feel concerned. However, after spending hours playing around in the bleak, open world and speaking with the team, I finally have faith that *Dying Light 2* is coming out soon. In late November, that faith was reaffirmed when Techland announced the game had gone gold and was ready to enter production ahead of its February launch date. If previous trailers and my hands-on time are any indication, this is one of the most exciting games to watch in the early part of next year. ■

Depending on which factions you align with, you have different difficult choices to make as the story progresses





Our Top 10 Games of 2021

T

The first full year of a new platform cycle is always exciting. Developers have new technologies to leverage in game releases, and players begin to glimpse the potential of new hardware. This particular new generation of gaming has had an unusual start. The global pandemic meant significant changes to development pipelines, causing production setbacks and global shipping delays. This resulted in games arriving later and new hardware that was difficult to find – even for the most diligent gaming enthusiasts.

Despite those challenges, 2021 came together as an excellent year for video games, filled with remarkable new experiences for players to enjoy. We've selected and ranked our picks for the 10 best releases of the year in the pages ahead, detailing exactly why these particular games are must-plays.

2021 was far more than just 10 great games, though. Other game releases, characters, and gaming companies stood out from the crowd in specific categories. To read our individual and genre awards for the best experiences of the year, head to p. 46. Everyone's tastes are different, and our editorial team each had their favorites to share; read each of their individual top 10 games of the year on p. 56.

by Game Informer Staff

10

PSYCHONAUTS 2



bizarre mental destinations such as a casino/hospital mash-up or a puppet-driven twist on *Iron Chef* was always an exciting prospect. We're glad that actually playing them proves just as entertaining; there's no Meat Circus to be found. Raz's psychic abilities, such as telekinesis and pyrokinesis, are as fun as ever. New powers like conjuring a goofy, wafer-thin doppelganger are welcome additions.

The espionage story stands as the highlight, thanks to its surprising twists and turns. Hanging out with Raz and his gang of old favorites and fun newcomers, including his entire family, left permanent smiles on our faces. Most admirably, the writing handles mental illnesses with respect and empathy instead of ridicule. Psychonauts 2 is a superb throwback to the platformers of yesteryear and it's Double Fine's magnum opus.

The original Psychonauts set the template for what would become the quintessential Double Fine game. That is to say, an experience that overflows with personality, humor, and imagination and gameplay that, while usually serviceable, doesn't reach the same heights. This trend finally ended with Psychonauts 2. Fans waited years for

this sequel, and, against all odds, it not only lives up to expectations but shatters the perception of what Double Fine is capable of.

Psychonauts 2's gameplay serves as a marked improvement over the original. Exceptional level design across an array of wildly imaginative worlds showcases the more finely tuned platforming. Exploring

INSCRIPTION

Excitement for Inscryption swept through our staff like wildfire at the year's end. The title is thick with atmosphere and mystery from the opening moments, taunting you to ask questions from the start screen. However, its impressive introduction is just a façade. Tearing it away shows the true layers at the heart of the narrative, slowly revealing what the game actually is and how you, the player, are instrumental to its story.

The core of Inscryption is a robust card game similar to Yu-Gi-Oh and Hearthstone that grows and changes over time. New mechanics and resource systems continuously appear throughout, providing plenty of viable builds to explore. You learn the ropes of the game in a dark cabin, with only the table to which you've been shackled visible in the flickering candlelight. Peering from the pitch-black shadows are the orange,

Best

PC Exclusive

Strategy

spiral eyes of your captor, who acts like a D&D game master, roleplaying your opponents in his sinister deckbuilding roguelike gauntlet. From there, Inscryption masterfully weaves puzzles in and out of its card game and exploration sequences. Every discovery is a chance to learn more about your desperate circumstance and advance further towards freedom.

Daniel Mullins Games' Inscryption is unsettling at times and downright wonderful at others; many of its best moments are ones we won't spoil here. It goes to incredible, unexpected places and is worth seeing through to the end. It's one of the most fascinating experiences of the year and truly hits best when you know as little as possible going in.

IT TAKES TWO

Best

Platformer

Cooperative



Teamwork is everything in It Takes Two, a cooperative-only experience that dazzles with its gameplay variety and ability to unite player individuality in dynamic ways. The two playable characters, Cody and May, were once in love but are now

divorcing – a decision that has broken the heart of their beloved child, Rose. Her tears cast a magical spell on her parents, turning them into small toys made of wood and clay. Their diminutive size turns their home into a sprawling world of wonder, ripe for perilous platforming and an

adventure that pounds with excitement.

Cody and May see the world differently, and their actions match their thinking. In one stage, Cody can place explosive gel, which only May's rifle can detonate. All of the action in the game unites the players and demands communication between them. This formula creates a riveting gameplay package that is constantly changing, giving players new challenges to overcome with each new area they reach. The gameplay also speaks to Cody and May developing as characters as they learn to put aside their differences and find a mutual understanding for their daughter.

It Takes Two has a wonderful heart, and the variety it offers keeps the experience fresh from start to finish. It's one of the most rewarding cooperative experiences to date and can be an absolute delight for friends, families, and lovers.

07

FORZA HORIZON 5



Best
Racing

To merely say Forza Horizon 5 is among the most mechanically sound racing games ever created would be a disservice and overlook what makes the game worthy of praise. Yes, the foundational act of driving feels fantastic, but it's the rest of the package that truly elevates this fifth entry in the series

to the rarified air that demands a place on our list of the top 10 games of the year.

From the moment you turn the game on, you're confronted with the undeniably gorgeous recreation of Mexico, where the technical powerhouse that is Forza Horizon 5 takes place. Not only that, but you're immediately thrust into the action, and – save for

a few small cutscenes after the impressive opening sequence – Forza Horizon 5 is a game about getting out of your way and letting you have fun.

As you comb through the detailed and diverse biomes, you encounter all manner of speedy pursuits. From traditional races and story-driven mission chains to vehicles hidden away in barns and communal multiplayer events, Forza Horizon 5 never short-changes the player when it comes to exciting, action-packed activities. Add on top of this some of the most impressive visuals in gaming today, plus an incredible sense of speed, and you have a game that both diehard and casual racing game fans can easily enjoy. It's a strong sell, even for those who are otherwise uninterested in the genre. Forza Horizon 5 isn't just the undisputed best racing game of 2021 but also one of the best overall games to release this year.

Emotional hardships make the Life is Strange series shine, but the newest entry doubles down to create a fascinating tale about resilience. Life is Strange: True Colors is not only *Game Informer's* best adventure game of 2021, but also features our best video game hero in the sarcastic and pained Alex Chen.

Deck Nine, which previously worked on the Life is Strange prequel, Before the Storm, took the reins from original developer Dontnod for this mainline entry. With that change comes some upgraded visuals, such as a more detailed and explorable landscape, alongside better-animated character models. The improved graphics catch your eye, but it's Alex Chen and her tragic story that captures your heart.

True Colors is about a lot of things: seeking justice, creating your own family, and coming to terms with your past, to name a few. But it's how Deck Nine showcases these complex topics through a small town and its protective residents that's especially memorable. Whether you take to Jed's father-figure tendencies or romance DJ and dungeon master Steph, growing Alex's bonds helps establish roots in this place and decide where her future lies.

As you forge connections, Alex's supernatural, mind-reading power gets more interesting. She can choose to take away what's hurting those around her. This is where Deck Nine takes the concept of empathy and turns it into a dilemma. Is removing someone's pain better for them, or do they need that process to grow? And what's the cost to ourselves when we take on other people's emotions? It's a journey we won't soon forget, especially the fun LARP romp through town.



Best
Adventure

LIFE IS STRANGE: TRUE COLORS

METROID DREAD

05



In the time between the release of Metroid Fusion for the Game Boy Advance and the launch of this year's Metroid Dread, a lot has happened. New Nintendo fans have been born, grown-up, and even started college. But one thing hasn't changed in 19 years: our love for Metroid's iconic exploration-based platforming. The moody, sci-fi adventures are so iconic they define an entire genre. Case in point, you can't browse an online store these days without bumping

into a new twist on the "Metroidvania" formula. But with Metroid Dread, Nintendo proves there's nothing wrong with the original design.

Dread's setup is simple: A dangerous parasite that mimics other creatures is slowly infecting the remote, alien planet ZDR, so the Galactic Federation dispatches a company of state-of-the-art robots to investigate and contain the outbreak. When contact with the machines goes dark, the Federation turns to something better than a gang of

high-tech murderbots: the bounty hunter Samus Aran.

Like Samus' previous adventures, Dread lets players slowly explore a sprawling, interconnected map. Around every turn is a new power-up or weapon allowing Samus to unlock new areas or defeat ZDR's gruesome foes. We loved climbing up walls with the Spider Magnet or unleashing a hailstorm of missiles on unsuspecting enemies – all while playing cat-and-mouse with the nearly-indestructible EMMI robots.

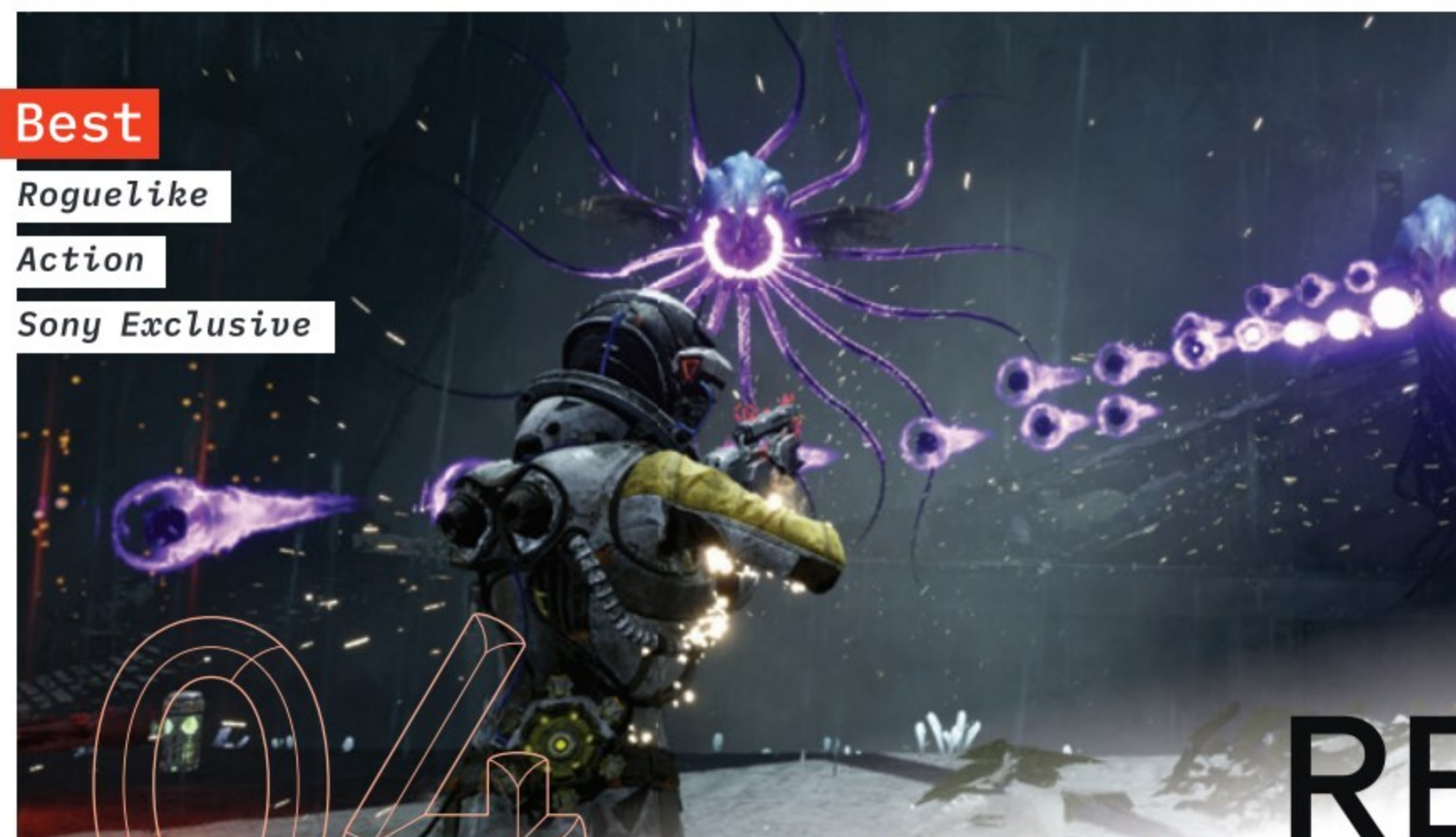
Metroid Dread provides a decent challenge, and its short runtime means that you can polish it off in about a weekend, but that just left us wanting more. We hope we don't have to wait another 19 years for the next 2D Metroid game, but even if it takes two decades for Nintendo to create another masterpiece like Dread, it will be worth the wait.

A cohesive undercurrent runs throughout the entirety of Returnal to create a masterpiece; art, gameplay, music, sound, and design come together in a symphony that all seems to have been crafted by the same hand. With Returnal, Housemarque has taken its expertise in the arcade bullet-hell genre and magically

melded the formula with the third-person roguelike shooter. These are all words that describe the nature of the game by category, but the best way to discuss Returnal is to call it an experience. What begins as a struggle through a harsh alien world becomes an adventure fueled in equal parts by curiosity and trepidation. As you continue, you overcome challenges, building

up a massive arsenal of interesting armaments over time.

Returnal takes oft-niche and hard-to-get-into genres like the bullet-hell, and turns them into an auditory and visual feast for the senses that anyone can dive into and explore. It's a triumph atmospherically and every element of the gameplay channels that tension and off-feeling of a strange alien world. Some areas like the fourth biome are masterpieces of environmental storytelling in this regard, where mysteries planted at the start of the level are terrifyingly solved with great satisfaction. Of the frontrunners, Returnal is really the only title that does anything outside of tried-and-true prescribed genre blends, and while there are other great games on the list, we think it's astonishing that its amalgamation of disparate aspects forms an absolute superb and riveting ride.



RETURNAL

03

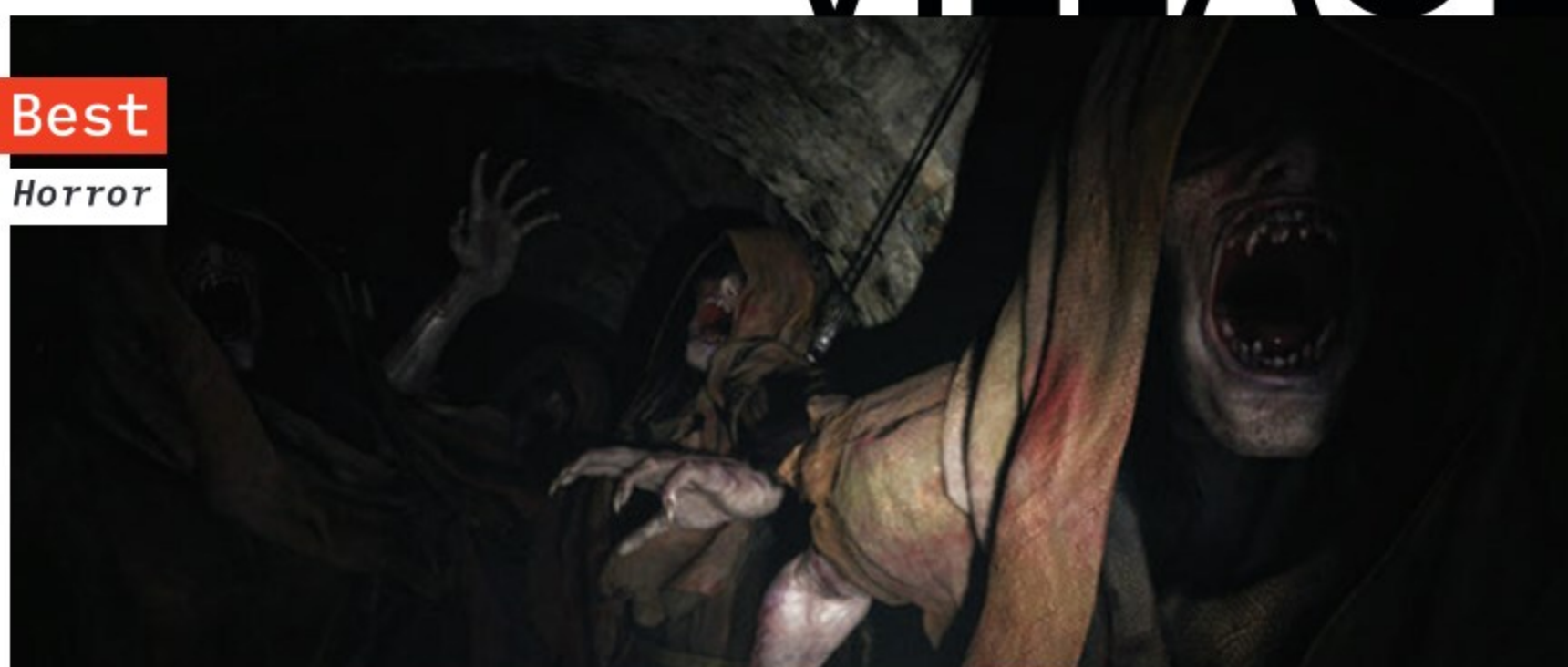
RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

Resident Evil Village is relentless. From its opening moments to its eventual conclusion, it's a non-stop, terrifying ride. Village is not only one of the best games of the year; it's one of the best horror games of all time.

Taking cues from 2005's Resident Evil 4, Village plays out like the greatest hits of horror tropes. There's the impossibly large gothic mansion full of deadly vampires. There's the psychologically damaging dollhouse. A semi-abandoned village, populated less by humans and more by werewolves. Body horror runs rampant – from grotesque human-fish monsters, to giants, to underdeveloped fetuses, and even cyber-punk monstrosities akin to *Tetsuo: The Iron Man*. The gang's all here and then some.

In the wrong hands, Village would be exhausting. It's hard to shoehorn in that much and not have it grate on the player or lose

Best
Horror



its impact. But one of the best things about Village is its pacing. Levels, scares, and monsters rarely overstay their welcome; everything feels timed out to the second to be as impactful as possible, and then it gets out of your way, on to the next nightmare.

And nightmare really is the best word for Village. It might not be the scariest game

of all time, but it's at least one of the most consistent and interesting. Playing Village never felt boring; it always had some trick up its sleeve, some new, unexpected terror. Always changing, always different. Resident Evil Village strikes a remarkable balance with its scares and is one of the best horror games we've ever played.

DEATHLOOP



Best
Level Design

There's a moment in Deathloop when it all clicks. Not a specific moment. It's likely at different points for every person, but eventually, players will figure out the game's various puzzles and mechanics. Deathloop will finally click.

That specific moment alone is almost enough to warrant consideration for game of the year.

Deathloop's premise is relatively simple:

You're Colt, trapped on the island Blackreef, which itself is trapped in a timeloop. To get out of this hell, you must kill eight targets, breaking the loop. You have to do this within 24 hours. If you fail, you start over.

It's simple in explanation, but in execution, meticulous and complicated. In the first few hours of Deathloop, you fumble around with its weapons, powers, and intricate levels, trying to stay alive long enough to reach one target; the idea of killing eight feels like

a pipedream wrapped in wishful thinking.

Over time, that objective becomes manageable. And then eventually, it clicks; all the puzzle pieces slide into place. The game no longer stands in your way. Deathloop becomes your playground of destruction and bloodshed.

Deathloop excels in that mechanical payoff. Flying through levels that initially took hours, commanding its action, and finally pulling off the final heist is satisfying in ways few other games are.

After finishing Deathloop, it is hard to resist starting a second playthrough. We wanted to fly through the early levels that gave us so many headaches, continuing to bend its world around our fingers. If you're patient enough to accept Deathloop's rules and terms, once the game gives you the keys to the castle, there's not much else like the ensuing mayhem.

02

01

HALO INFINITE

Best*Game of the Year**Shooter**Competitive**Microsoft Exclusive**Original Score*

For over a decade, 343 Industries has been the shepherd of the Halo universe, taking the reins from original developer, Bungie, and continuing to chart a new course for the series. Halo 4 and Halo 5: Guardians found success in their own rights, but longtime fans noted that gameplay and storytelling veered from previous form. In the final weeks of this year, 343 managed a remarkable feat with its release of Halo Infinite – zeroing in on a framework for both campaign and multiplayer that felt unmistakably “Halo” while simultaneously exploring fresh ideas that help launch the series into the future.

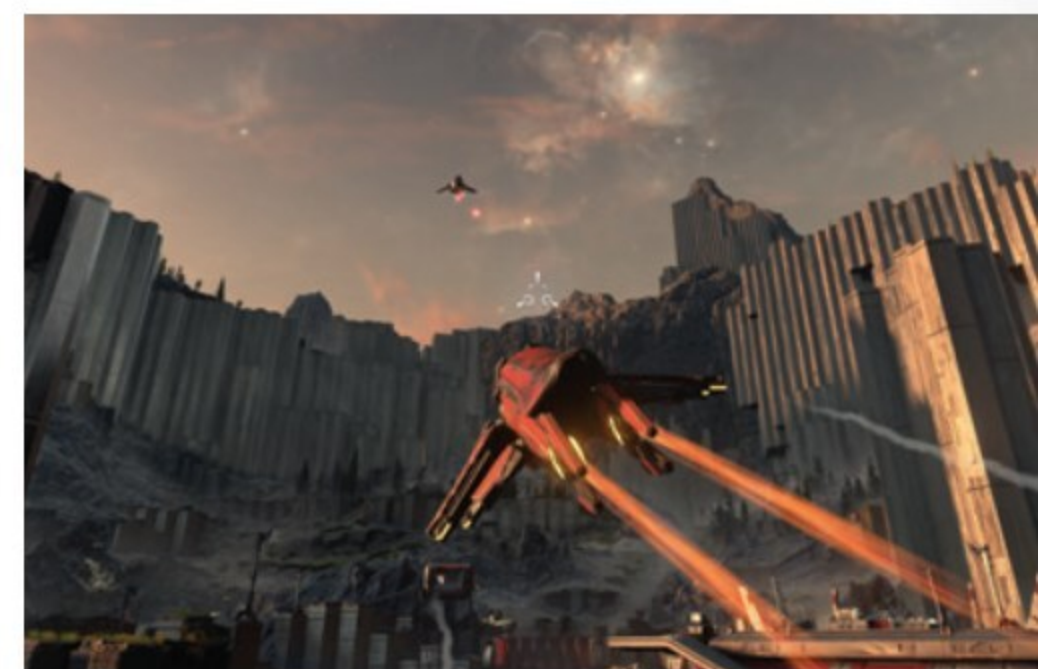
That meeting point between old and new is apparent from the first hours of Infinite’s campaign. Individual story beats seem at times to directly echo moments from the original Halo: Combat Evolved. Enemy combatants feel fierce, familiar, and challenging. The ringworld setting itself recalls the Pacific northwest locale

that initially inspired the series. And many multiplayer modes aptly reflect the tense exchanges the franchise first employed.

Look closer, and Infinite reveals that it is far more than a fresh coat of paint on an old formula. New equipment, especially the grappleshot, changes the way players confront a battle. Major missions, open-world exploration, and upgrades lend increased replay value and a sense of discovery. Specific encounters, particularly at large bases, support player freedom and creative problem-solving. And in multiplayer, expanded Big Team Battle rosters, a more significant role for equipment, and a free-to-play model that invites all players to the table, regardless of platform, are just some of the notable shifts.

No game is perfect, and Halo Infinite’s launch release has space for improvement. Multiplayer progression, the number of maps, and limited customization all need addressing. And in the campaign, the absence of cooperative play is a gut punch.

But a game doesn’t need to be perfect to stand out. Infinite offers immaculate shooting, one of the best original musical scores in years, and a heartfelt storyline rooted in themes of hope and resilience – much-needed topics for many players in 2021. It’s a return to form for a much-beloved franchise and a standout marquee release for Microsoft’s new generation of releases. Halo Infinite is a game we can’t put down and one we’re likely to continue pouring hours into as we head into 2022. ■





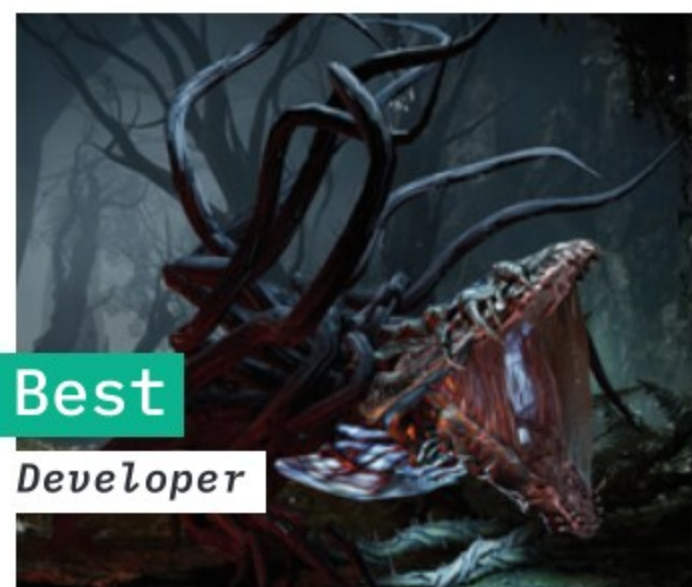
The Best & Brightest of 2021



+ - - -

E

Even as the world continued to face a mounting health crisis, developers overcame unprecedented obstacles to create and release a bevy of stunning games. Beyond the 10 best we selected as representatives of 2021's highest marks, there were dozens of other projects that impressed us. Read ahead to learn about the games, characters, and companies that won our awards in particular categories, as well as personal editor picks for the games that helped make 2021 a standout year for gaming.



Best

Developer

HOUSEMARQUE

Already a proven master of arcade twin-stick shooter and bullet-hell games, Housemarque deftly translates those disciplines into something far more atmospheric and immersive with Returnal. Returnal showcases an astonishing adherence to the studio's strengths while pushing out to bold new frontiers, honing its craft, and serving up less-traveled game genres in fascinating new ways.

editor pick

The Artful Escape

The Artful Escape got my attention in the early minutes with its quirky sensibility, and earned my ongoing affection with its earnest and wholesome message about being yourself and charting your own course. The breathtaking alien environments are like moving pieces of cover art from some forgotten '70s album cover. And I love that much of the game is simply running through those surreal scenes while holding down a button to wail on your guitar. With only the barest nods to actual gameplay, developer Beethoven & Dinosaur has crafted a pure and simple ode to music, becoming who you're meant to be, and celebrating the weird. All players need to do is get into the flow. – **Matt Miller**



editor pick



New Pokémon Snap

Despite Pokémon Snap's popularity, it looked like the N64 title would never get a follow-up until, more than 20 years later, New Pokémon Snap's surprise reveal. The game boasts all the charm of the original and rekindles my childlike enthusiasm for gaming like no other title this year. Gliding through New Pokémon Snap's Blushing Beach, I not only enjoy capturing new generations of Pokémon in a gorgeously upgraded setting, but I also delight in reliving that moment when, as a kid, I got Pikachu to jump up on a surfboard for the first time. New Pokémon Snap's nostalgic pursuit of high-scoring Pokémon photos manages to be both comfortably familiar while new levels and mechanics offer energizingly fresh experiences. – **Jill Grodt**

editor pick

Chicory: A Colorful Tale

At first glance, Chicory appears to be aimed at kindergartners. The whimsical title unfolds in a living coloring book, with players controlling a heroic puppy named after their favorite food (shoutout to my girl, Ice Cream) who's tasked with bringing color to the world after it mysteriously vanishes. However, it doesn't take long before the game's sharp sense of humor and adult themes reveal themselves. Chicory tackles mental health issues such as depression and imposter syndrome better than most "mature" games, and several moments made me pause and think. Gameplay boasts clever puzzles and challenging boss battles that utilize your magic paintbrush in wonderfully inventive ways. — Marcus Stewart



editor pick

Griftlands

Klei Entertainment moves seamlessly between genres, and its new deckbuilding roguelike is another example of the developer's flexibility and skill. Players go through several different adventures, each shaped by the main character whose journey you undertake, with card-based gameplay built to surface that character's unique personality and skills. The wild sci-fi-infused setting is original and thoughtfully constructed, and I love that every run lets me take the storyline in different directions. But it's the clever card encounters that make Griftlands shine, with unique decks for both combat and dialogue exchanges, each of which lead to tense and memorable battles. — Matt Miller

MICROSOFT

Best

Publisher



ALEX CHEN

Not all heroes fight monsters, and they don't need special powers, but no one told Life is Strange: True Colors' Alex Chen. However, it's not her supernatural ability or combat skills that make her worthy of the title. It's her humanity. It highlights her excruciatingly relatable struggles and prompts her compassion, even in terrible circumstances.

Best

Hero



Best

Remade Game

VR



RESIDENT EVIL 4 VR

We never thought Resident Evil 4 would ever feel new again. RE4 VR completely shattered that assumption. It isn't just a reimagining of a classic; it's a complete reinvention. Freely moving through combat for the first time breathes fresh air into an old, familiar feeling, making one of the best games of all time all the better.

editor pick



Unsighted

This killer action game boasts fast-paced hack-and-slash combat, Zelda-inspired exploration, and a devilish stipulation. Everyone, including yourself, allies, shop owners, and quest-giving NPCs is slowly turning into monsters. That's no bluff; each person has an in-game timer counting down to their doom, creating a genuine race against the clock. That dynamic adds real stakes to an excellently crafted adventure featuring well-designed dungeons and an array of entertaining boss battles. I always regretted seeing a trusted friend devolve into a monster, but I found solace every time I tore through foes using a fun combination of swords and guns. Unsighted has it all and could be 2021's best-kept secret.

– Marcus Stewart



editor pick

Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury

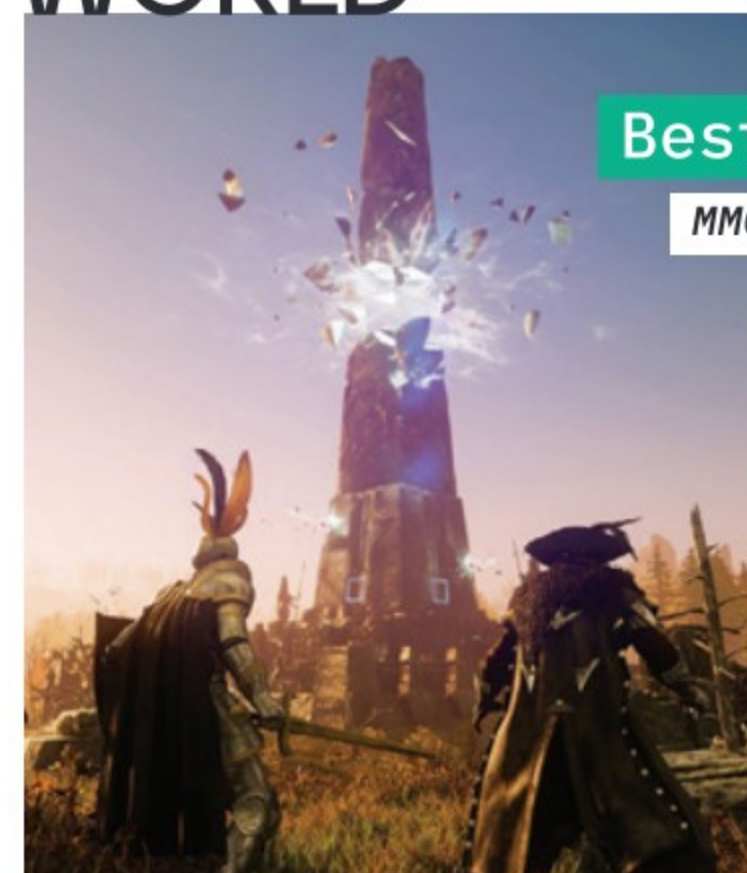
As one of the last remaining Wii U essentials to make the leap to Switch, Super Mario 3D World was long overdue for a modern port. Thankfully, Nintendo finally remedied that by bringing the 2013 hit to Switch with new features like online co-op and increased character speed. However, the big draw of this package is Bowser's Fury, a new open-world game full of excellent obstacle courses. Bowser's Fury adds a new ever-present boss mechanic where a large version of Bowser emerges at different intervals to inject chaos into whatever you're doing. Bowser's Fury may be just a side dish to the main course of Mario 3D World, but it's the perfect pairing to round out this stellar package. – Brian Shea

DIABLO II



Best
Remaster

NEW WORLD



Best
MMO

editor pick

Far Cry 6

Far Cry 6 is a reminder that evolution and innovation don't necessarily need to go hand in hand. Sure, Far Cry 6 adds to the tried-and-true franchise formula, but at its heart, this is the series fans have come to know ever since 2012's acclaimed Far Cry 3. True to series pedigree, the massive island of Yara offers up a ton of activities to take part in. This entry more aptly manages the dissonance between the heavy narrative themes of the main story and the zany activities of the side content. Add to that the looming presence of ruthless dictator Antón Castillo (played menacingly by Giancarlo Esposito of *Breaking Bad* and *The Mandalorian* fame), plus Dani Rojas, the best protagonist in series history, and Far Cry 6 is a strong return to form for the series. — Brian Shea



Best
Dork

THE RIDERS

There aren't enough words in the English language to describe how lame the characters in Riders Republic are. At every chance, they spout meaningless slang at you, desperately trying to convince you they're cool ("You're working these events like a pork rib! Nummies"). It falls flat in all conceivable ways. They're dorks in every way imaginable.



editor pick

Nier Replicant

Nier Replicant's bleak wasteland may be empty, but its characters are full of heart. A "version upgrade" of the 2010 game, Replicant's enhanced graphics, flashy combat, and remastered score occasionally catapult the JRPG to the same heights of its acclaimed sequel, Automata. Yoko Taro's signature motifs – human frailty, transcendent bonds, and blind vengeance – help strengthen plot motivations and catalyze some genuinely morbid story beats. Whether it's with the foul-mouthed warrior Kainé, the masked sorcerer Emil, or the protective older brother protagonist, you're bound to fall in love with Nier Replicant's tragic characters as they slay shadowy monstrosities and overcome their respective insecurities. – Jason Guisao



editor pick

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

I wish there were more games like Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart. Which is to say, a big-budget, triple-A game with bright colors, childish humor, and all-around good vibes. It never asked all that much from me and never really pushed my skills as a player, which was perfectly fine. At all times, Rift Apart rewarded my basic interest with beautiful visuals, over-the-top setpieces, and weapons as goofy as they were dumb. I loved every second of it. At the end of the day, it might not swing for the fences, but sometimes just being a really good version of something old and familiar is all you need. Also, Kit was robbed of our Best Hero of the Year award. I love that little robot. – Blake Hester



editor pick

Death's Door

Death's Door, Acid Nerve's follow-up to Titan Souls, is a downright masterpiece. You play as a lowly crow, a reaper of souls for a bureaucratic agency, tasked with retrieving the essence of a creature choosing to defy the bounds of death. When that mission goes sideways, you have to fight through dangerous areas, solve clever puzzles, and defeat daunting bosses who, like your primary target, are skirting the rules of death. Along the way, you'll learn more about the history of the crow's Reaping Commission and its head honcho, the Lord of Doors. Death's Door is a svelte journey full of lovable characters, tight combat, and well-realized lore worth seeing to the end and beyond. – John Carson



Best

Villain

LADY DIMITRESCU

It's amazing what memes can do. Before Resident Evil Village was released, the internet decided it loved Lady Dimitrescu. When the game finally came out, she didn't disappoint. Lady D is menacing in every sense of the word – impossibly large, cruel, vindictive, and vicious; she stalks you for hours, never once giving you a moment to breathe.

editor pick

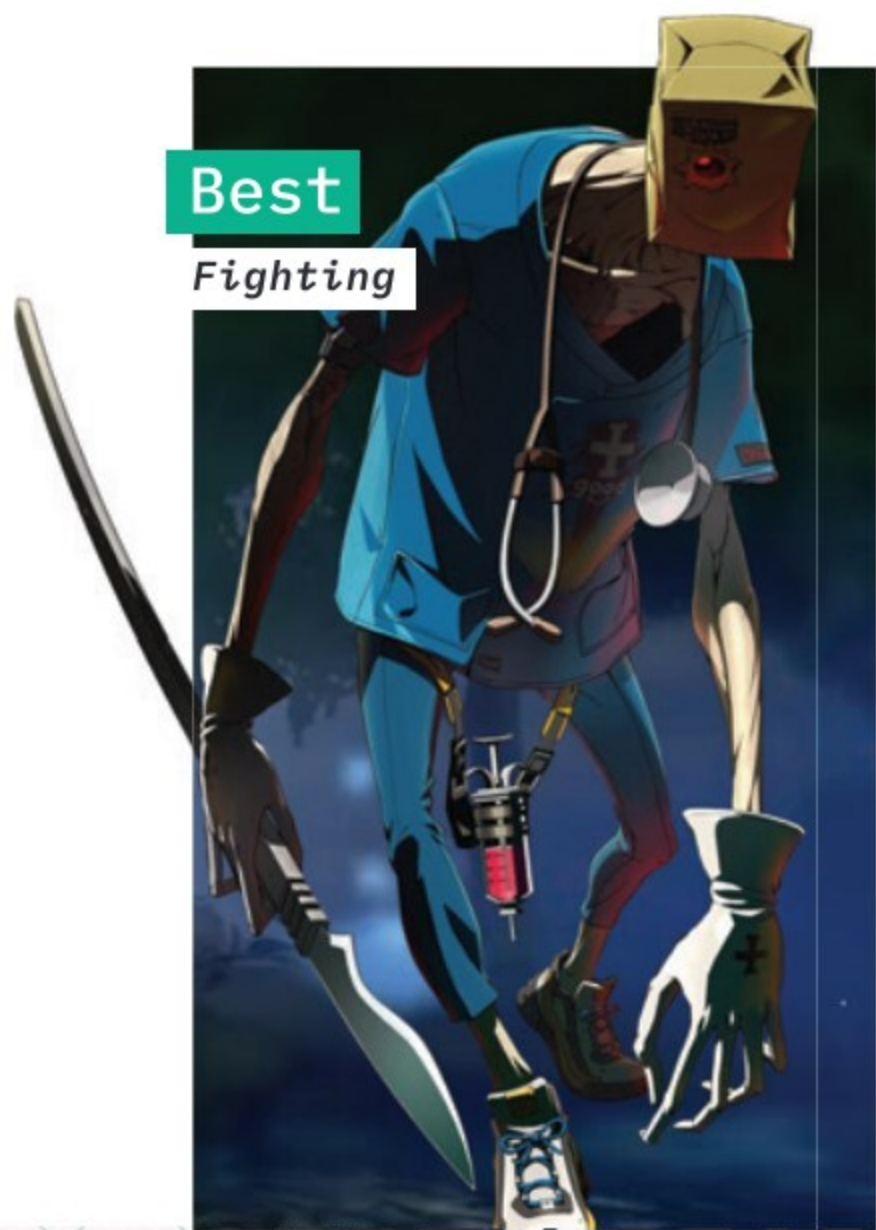


Wildermyth

Wildermyth does something I didn't think possible, pairing the intense variation and replayability of procedural generation with Dungeons & Dragons-style campaign modules and story. Every campaign is different, as you'll watch your characters survive, thrive, transform, and more before your very eyes. Of course, there's plenty of danger lurking behind every corner as you attempt to navigate strategic tactical grid battles with your flavorful magic, arrows, and swords. This ambitious undertaking pays off, as each adventure is inundated with many micro-decisions that form a greater narrative, with you at the helm. – Daniel Tack

Best

Fighting



GUILTY GEAR
-STRIVE-



editor pick

The Forgotten City

A mystery thousands of years in the making is unfolding inside of a cavernous mountain. Your task is to solve it, but your intent has to be true, as any lie, theft, or misdeed will anger a god who will kill everyone who calls this place home. The Forgotten City spins this yarn in clever and powerful ways, with each conversation and action uniting to create one of gaming's most unique and successful narrative tapestries. Who do you trust? Do you think you can get away with a lie without the god noticing? Even though the gameplay mostly consists of conversations between two people, it delivers excitement and makes you want to see what will happen next. The Forgotten City is a storytelling masterpiece. – Andrew Reiner



editor pick

Pokémon Unite

Pokémon Unite is an exciting interpretation of the franchise, featuring iconic monsters and movesets, stylish animations, and simple goals that make it a great intro to MOBAs – a genre infamous for its steep learning curve. Whether you're playing as new-gen creatures like Greedent or beloved characters like Charizard or Sylveon, the game's ever-growing roster of Pokémon are a joy to play. And since they each have unique stats, ability trees, and powerful Unite Moves, they all feel distinct. Pokémon Unite offers new ways to control one of gaming's most iconic casts, and the game's 10-player battles are compelling for casual and competitive-minded players alike. – Alex Van Aken

TALES OF ARISE

Tales of Arise is not only a fantastic RPG, but also a series standout, earning worldwide acclaim and breaking franchise records, becoming the fastest Tales game to surpass 1 million copies sold. And for good reason: It takes smart risks, evolving the series' core formula, bringing in a new visual style, more strategic combat, and a mature story about warring nations. The latest Tales game is the reinvention the long-running Bandai Namco series deserves.



Best

Role-Playing



THE BIG CHANGE

If you asked someone to describe Inscryption, they'd likely tell you that's a hard task. That's because a third of the way through, Inscryption becomes so much more than a card game. It becomes an escape room, a revelation, and more. This moment explicitly says, "Inscryption is not what you thought." Enjoy it, and prepare for a ride.



editor pick

Kena: Bridge of Spirits

In Kena: Bridge of Spirits, you play as Kena, a spirit guide tasked with helping the dead transition from this plane to the next. She must determine what's kept a spirit angry or restless, unable to move on to the spirit world. Each NPC story, dead or alive, highlights what life is about – love, forgiveness, and more – and does so beautifully and does so beautifully thanks to gorgeous visuals from Ember Lab. Kena: Bridge of Spirits, as a whole, is a reminder that death is unavoidable, and while scary, it's meant to add gravity to all we do. Instead of worrying about it, focus on making every moment here meaningful so that when death does arrive, there aren't any regrets. Kena helped me understand that.

– Wesley LeBlanc

JURASSIC WORLD EVOLUTION



editor pick

Little Nightmares II

Little Nightmares II is one of the most atmospheric and terrifying games of 2021. The story of Mono and Six sent shivers down my spine as the protagonists fight, hide, and run their way through this horrifying hellscape. Masters of the macabre, Tarsier Studios has outdone itself by building on the grotesque nature of the first game and deepening the intrigue of this diseased and dilapidated nightmare. The studio continues to show off its uncanny ability to channel the horrors of childhood anxiety and fear into a fascinating tale that still haunts me today. There may have been bigger games in 2021, but Little Nightmares II stands tall and continues to prove why the series deserves more than a cult following. – Alex Stadnik



KNOCKOUT CITY



Best
Sports



editor pick

Guardians of the Galaxy

The year was full of curiosities but Eidos-Montréal's take on Guardians of the Galaxy was one of the biggest surprises. I expected a fun romp through space, but the team delivered an action-packed adventure with a ton of heart. I loved watching Star-Lord interact with Gamora, Rocket Raccoon, Groot, Drax, and a host of other intergalactic oddballs. The title overflows with dialogue and story moments, which kept me invested in the adventure until the closing credits. Thankfully, Eidos-Montréal's approach to team-based combat also kept me engaged. I loved dishing out orders to the crew in the heat of battle, and never tired of watching these heroes dive bomb into a series of spectacular firefights. – Ben Reeves



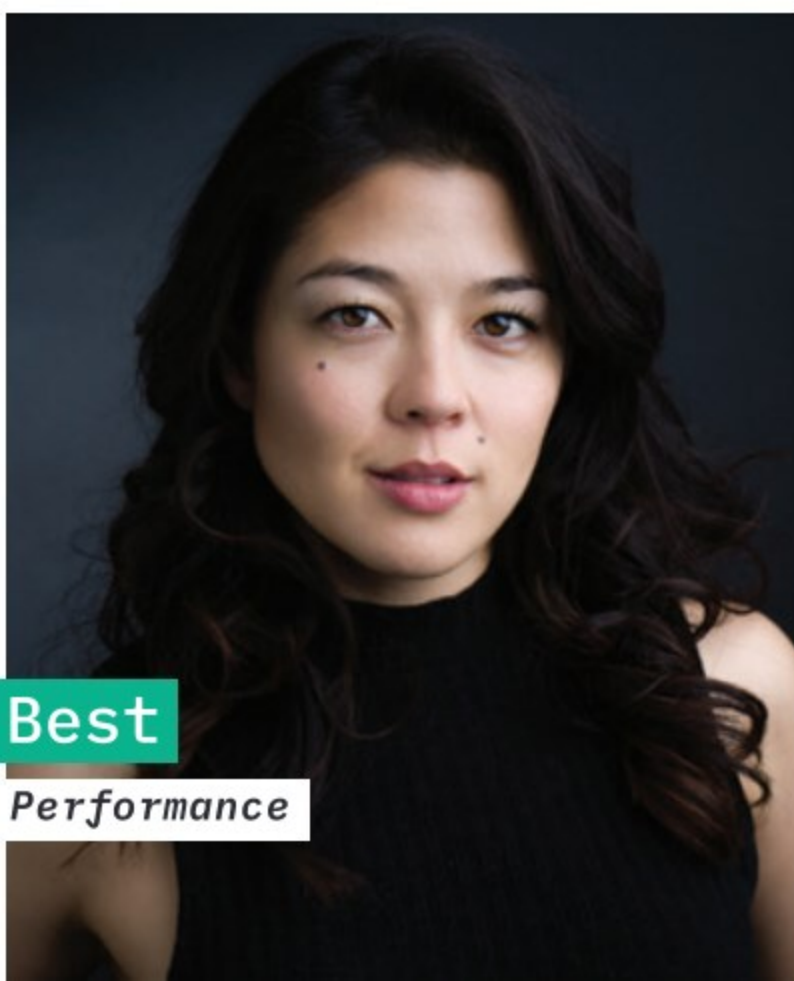
editor pick

Back 4 Blood

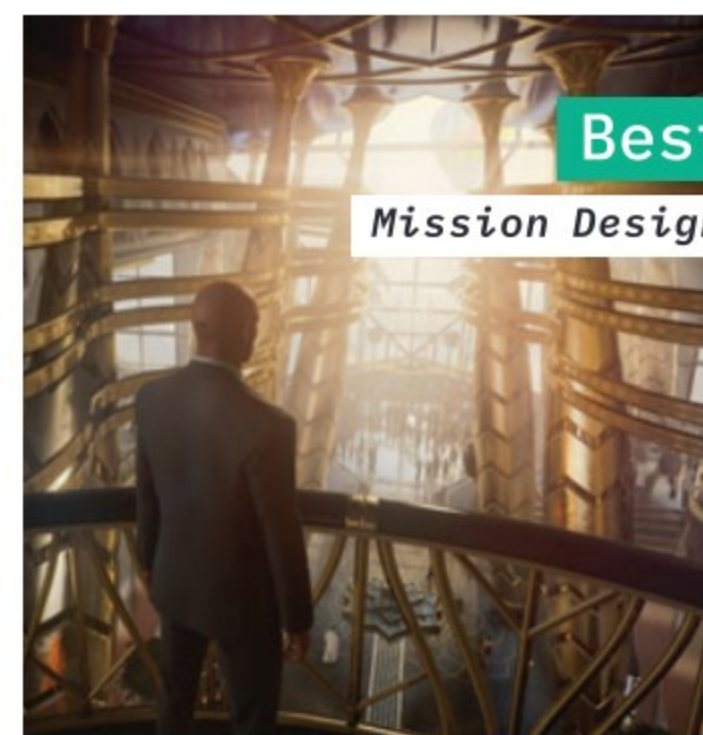
Back 4 Blood is my comfort-food game of the year, which sounds weird for a title about slaughtering the undead. As a fan of Left 4 Dead, I felt at home picking my Cleaner and setting out to save Fort Hope from the Breakers, Bruisers, and other special Ridden. Not content to recreate the past, Turtle Rock modernizes the experience with a card system where players earn varied and meaningful modifiers that make each run through the Ridden-filled world feel unique. It's the mixture of familiar yet satisfying gunplay and the promise of something new every time that has me still playing Back 4 Blood long after Halloween has come and gone. – Alex Stadnik

ERIKA MORI

Erika Mori's fantastic performance as Alex Chen in Life is Strange: True Colors endears you to her character. Mori both voiced and did full-body capture to get everything from Alex's mannerisms to eye movements just right, and her spot-on delivery for the character's charming sarcasm coupled with her vulnerability sells Alex's plight.



Best
Performance



Best
Mission Design

HITMAN 3

Hitman 3 is a masterful exercise in mission design, exhibiting some of the series' most elaborate environments. From the neon-lit streets of China, to a skyscraper peeking through the clouds above Dubai, to a murder mystery set in England's moorlands, IO Interactive has assembled a collection of missions as beautiful as they are complex.

GHOST OF TSUSHIMA IKI ISLAND

Best

DLC



editor pick



Solar Ash

Heart Machine's follow-up to *Hyper Light Drifter* is a beautiful space odyssey. As the voidrunner Rei, players explore a dangerous yet visually alluring black hole called the Ultravoid to prevent her homeworld from succumbing to its pull. I love platformers, and Rei's nimble, high-speed "skating" feels smooth as silk. Leaping across fragmented ruins and slashing foes to bits along the way feels immensely satisfying, but that excitement kicks up a notch while racing across the precarious backs of living, cosmic colossi. The only times I wanted to slow down were to absorb the Ultravoid's fascinating remnants of lore from the numerous civilizations it's consumed. ■

— Marcus Stewart

SABLE

Best

Art Direction



Editor Top 10 Picks –2021



Andrew Reiner

- 01 Halo Infinite
- 02 It Takes Two
- 03 Deathloop
- 04 Psychonauts 2
- 05 Forza Horizon 5
- 06 Metroid Dread
- 07 Returnal
- 08 Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart
- 09 Kena: Bridge of Spirits
- 10 Resident Evil Village

Kimberley Wallace

- 01 Resident Evil Village
- 02 Life is Strange: True Colors
- 03 Deathloop
- 04 Psychonauts 2
- 05 Tales of Arise
- 06 Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart
- 07 Persona 5 Strikers
- 08 Shin Megami Tensei V
- 09 Back 4 Blood
- 10 Nier Replicant

Blake Hester

- 01 Resident Evil Village
- 02 Hitman 3
- 03 Deathloop
- 04 Resident Evil 4 VR
- 05 Death Stranding Director's Cut
- 06 Fortnite
- 07 Psychonauts 2
- 08 Back 4 Blood
- 09 Halo Infinite
- 10 Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury

John Carson

- 01 Metroid Dread
- 02 Inscryption
- 03 Halo Infinite
- 04 Monster Hunter Rise
- 05 Death's Door
- 06 Returnal
- 07 Guilty Gear -Strive-
- 08 Loop Hero
- 09 Diablo II: Resurrected
- 10 Dodgeball Academia

Alex Stadnik

- 01 Halo Infinite
- 02 Psychonauts 2
- 03 Metroid Dread
- 04 Resident Evil Village
- 05 Before Your Eyes
- 06 Returnal
- 07 Deathloop
- 08 Life is Strange: True Colors
- 09 Inscryption
- 10 Little Nightmares II

Matt Miller

- 01 Halo Infinite
- 02 Ghost of Tsushima: Director's Cut
- 03 Destiny 2
- 04 Forza Horizon 5
- 05 Back 4 Blood
- 06 Deathloop
- 07 The Artful Escape
- 08 Metroid Dread
- 09 Returnal
- 10 Griftlands

Brian Shea

- 01 Forza Horizon 5
- 02 Deathloop
- 03 Halo Infinite
- 04 Returnal
- 05 Far Cry 6
- 06 Inscryption
- 07 Ghost of Tsushima: Director's Cut
- 08 Metroid Dread
- 09 The Forgotten City
- 10 Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy

Jason Guisao

- 01 Tales of Arise
- 02 Nier Replicant
- 03 Forza Horizon 5
- 04 Halo Infinite
- 05 Deathloop
- 06 Returnal
- 07 Life is Strange: True Colors
- 08 Psychonauts 2
- 09 Death Stranding Director's Cut
- 10 Mass Effect Legendary Edition

Jill Grodt

- 01 Life is Strange: True Colors
- 02 Sable
- 03 It Takes Two
- 04 Death's Door
- 05 Darkest Dungeon 2
- 06 Ghost of Tsushima: Director's Cut
- 07 Inscryption
- 08 Valheim
- 09 The Artful Escape
- 10 New Pokémon Snap

Alex Van Aken

- 01 Deathloop
- 02 Halo Infinite
- 03 Death's Door
- 04 Resident Evil Village
- 05 Hitman 3
- 06 Inscryption
- 07 The Forgotten City
- 08 Pokémon Unite
- 09 Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury
- 10 Loop Hero

Ben Reeves

- 01 Deathloop
- 02 Resident Evil Village
- 03 Metroid Dread
- 04 Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart
- 05 The Forgotten City
- 06 Inscryption
- 07 Psychonauts 2
- 08 Life is Strange: True Colors
- 09 Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury
- 10 Chicory: A Colorful Tale

Daniel Tack

- 01 Returnal
- 02 Library of Ruina
- 03 Little Nightmares II
- 04 Monster Hunter Stories 2
- 05 Wildermyth
- 06 Forza Horizon 5
- 07 Resident Evil Village
- 08 Scarlet Nexus
- 09 Shin Megami Tensei V
- 10 Melvor Idle

Marcus Stewart

- 01 Psychonauts 2
- 02 Death's Door
- 03 Before Your Eyes
- 04 Deathloop
- 05 Resident Evil Village
- 06 It Takes Two
- 07 Chicory: A Colorful Tale
- 08 The Forgotten City
- 09 Returnal
- 10 Inscryption

Wesley LeBlanc

- 01 Inscryption
- 02 Returnal
- 03 Halo Infinite
- 04 Deathloop
- 05 Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury
- 06 Forza Horizon 5
- 07 Before Your Eyes
- 08 Resident Evil Village
- 09 Sea of Thieves: A Pirate's Life
- 10 Death's Door



Previews

spotlight

58 ELDEN RING // **60** FORSPOKEN // **62** ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA // **63** MULTIVERSUS
64 LITTLE DEVIL INSIDE // **64** STAR OCEAN THE DIVINE FORCE // **65** A MEMOIR BLUE
66 HAUNTED CHOCOLATIER // **67** THE KING OF FIGHTERS XV // **69** WE ARE OFK



ELDEN RING

The mysteries unveiled

We knew little about From Software's upcoming action-RPG, *Elden Ring*, at the beginning of the year, but now we know a lot after an extensive foray into a slice of the game. While it was difficult to get a sense of just how deep the lore goes in this small area, expectations remain high for author G.R.R. Martin's (*A Song of Ice and Fire*) contributions to the title. For many hours, I scoured the land for every secret, boss, and new playstyle option. While this was just a tiny piece of the full game, it contained scores of bizarre creatures to fight, loads of weapons to try, and hidden mysteries around every corner.

First and foremost, *Elden Ring* is not just *Dark Souls 4* by another name. While there is a copious amount of *Dark Souls* DNA injected into *Elden Ring*'s world, this is another entity entirely. Yes, the core of the experience builds upon concepts, features, and mechanics From Software has continually experimented with in the *Souls* series, but flavorful aspects of *Sekiro* and *Bloodborne* run throughout as well, with entirely new layers applied on top. From Software has channeled everything it's learned over the last decade of creating brilliant titles into something special, an alchemical creation that draws upon all its past work and offers the player free reign in a beautiful – and terrifying – universe.

Elden Ring gives players more options to tackle challenges and also cuts down on the frustration of clashing against the same boss over and over. Because of the open-world design, players are encouraged to explore other areas if they can't take on a particular foe or deadly environment. While that's nice, From has also added other conveniences that don't take away from the defeat/triumph cycle that make boss fights so epic. Players can now respawn at Stakes of Marika in addition to the standard checkpoints. These stakes are conveniently placed right next to boss battles. If you lose to a boss you want to keep fighting, forget having to run up a hill, through a lake, and down a hall full of minions to get back in the



action – you can jump right back in immediately for another round or 10. While that won't make the battles any easier, it takes the edge off a bad defeat.

Players can also employ spirits during most battles in both the overworld and inside boss arenas. Multiplayer components are still a part of the game, including summoning friends or random players into a game to help. However, if you don't want to mess around with summon signs, spirits act as summonable NPCs that can help break up giant hordes of enemies or distract a deadly foe on-demand. A wide variety of spirits can be discovered and have different applications depending on the situation. For instance, you may be able to mob a strong, slow foe with a small army of townsfolk or wolves, but those summons might be next to worthless against an opponent with heavy area-of-effect attacks. While a human companion could probably provide even more value, the spirits let you take helpful friends into battle without messing with multiplayer. Of course, spirits are disabled in multiplayer, as numerous players summoning spirits all fighting at the same time would trivialize just about any encounter.

Streamlining and adding other features does wonders for *Elden Ring* in terms of how it stacks up compared to its predecessors. If the

network test demo is any indication, all your leveling up, skill-swapping, and other character progression can take place at any checkpoint with no need to head to a hub. Are you one of those players that's always hesitant to use consumables? Do you finish *Final Fantasy* games with a stack of untouched Elixirs? *Elden Ring* solves this problem by letting players produce their own replenishable concoctions at checkpoints with something called the Flask of Wondrous Physick. This item can be tailored in numerous ways by adding components and refills every time you rest alongside the rest of your healing/mana flasks. It's a buff that you can tailor to your own specifications that you're always encouraged to use.

Spending hour upon hour in a walled garden in an open-world game isn't the best the game can be, and it was frustrating to be unable to go beyond the confines of the demo I played. That said, the experience just inside this space was enough to make me a believer in whatever's coming next. Myriad smaller dungeons, huge sprawling big dungeons, giant bosses, and something just waiting to be discovered around every corner has *Elden Ring* looking like an incredible 2022 offering and From Software's best game to date. We'll have to see what happens come February. **BY DANIEL TACK**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/RPG (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER From Software **RELEASE** February 25



FORSPOKEN

Ready to say more

Though unveiled during the PlayStation 5 2020 reveal event, *Forspoken* has been sparse on details. The Game Awards provided a new look at the game, but still left us with questions. However, a recent press event finally pulled back the curtain, giving us an in-depth, though hands-off, look at the gameplay. Still, the team is only painting the story in broad strokes.

Forspoken follows Frey Holland, an orphan living a harsh life in New York City with her cat, Homer. In dire circumstances and with the threat of jail hanging over her, Frey dreams of the day she can leave everything behind. Her wish is dramatically granted when she is abruptly flung into a mysterious and fantastical world called Athia. Stranded, she realizes the golden cuff on her arm can speak to her and that she has the power to dash, move things with her mind, and fight through the magical realm.

Our gameplay preview begins in the towering city of Cipal. Its large, stone-crafted plaza bristles with people, refugees from a horrific haze called the Break. Anything that comes into contact with this ever-spreading

“corrupting miasma” is forever altered. It kills some, while wildly mutating others. The tens of thousands of survivors trapped in Cipal – originally built as a meeting center and not a permanent dwelling – remain safe due to its high elevation. However, Frey seems immune to the Break and soon ventures out into the vast open world filled with the perilous fog.

She treads craggy pathways lined with neon foliage and aurora borealis snaking overhead, perhaps a visual hint of what the miasma has done to the land. Eventually, Frey encounters a horde of zombie-like enemies, presumably people driven mad by the Break, ready to attack. Combat looks as sleek as it did in

the trailer. Frey has a wide array of battle-ready magic to choose from in the demo. A triangle appears on the bottom right of the screen, and each corner has a spell mapped to it that can be activated by the right or left trigger buttons. You can also quickly bring up the “ring menu” to swap out different skills mid-combat. These include spells like “Fan Bolt,” which sprays a shimmering barrage of horizontal missiles from your hands. And if shooting projectiles doesn’t suit the moment or your playstyle, you have various other spell types to pick from, including traps, ranged attacks, or close quarters magic. Every opponent you defeat grants you XP. The fighting looks rapid, slick, and

intriguing, and left me more excited to try it out in the future.

But traveling across the mist-covered Athia isn't all about fighting. Frey can rest at various shelters, which allow her to either sleep or craft. At the workbench, you can use resources collected from the mutated world to concoct healing items or upgrade your gear. Your equipable cloaks and necklaces, as well as spell-buffing fingernail ornamentation, will help you take on the world's challenges. While in the menu looking at the gear, the Forspoken team showed off a quick glimpse of the skill tree, which allows you to learn new spells in exchange for mana. However, it's uncertain how to collect mana for now.

One of Forspoken's most promising features, magical parkour, still looks fantastic in this short game-play presentation. Frey's shoes glow gold, and light dances around her as she dashes across open plains, surges up cliffs, and shoots across chasms. Developer Luminous Productions explains players can move freely – and with style – through Athia, saying tall walls present only a fleeting challenge since Frey can force her way up and over them with ease. While it seems like players can unleash their parkour skills at any time, they can also use “anchor locations” to navigate some obstacles, which seem to pull Frey towards a specific, chosen spot.

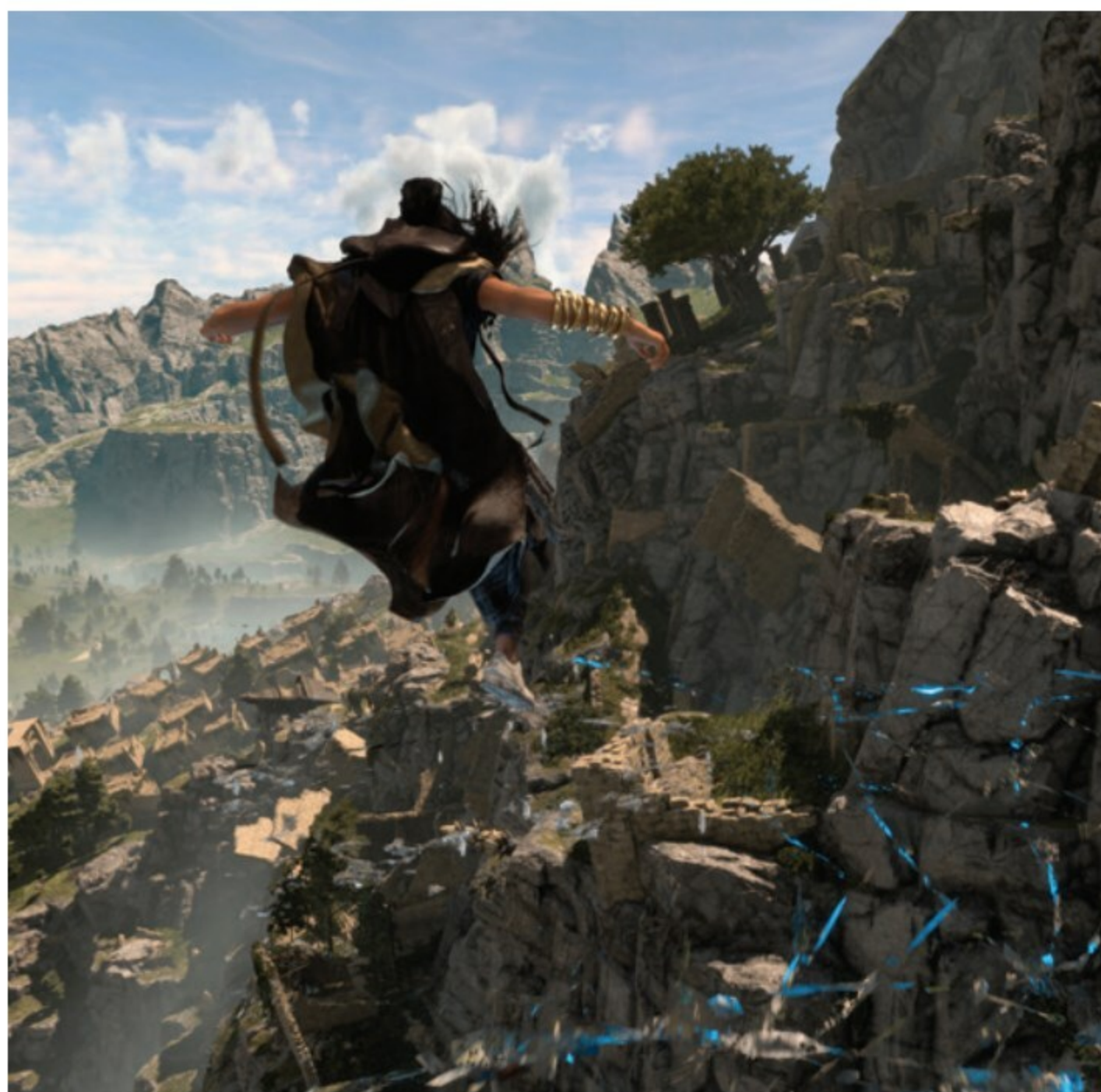
Back in Athia's dangerous landscape, this time a wind-swept desert, Frey encounters one of the game's biggest hazards: a Break Storm. It sweeps over the protagonist and throws incredibly powerful enemies in her path, enemies that defeat her this time. With her demise, the demo ends, leaving me ready to explore Forspoken's powerful sorcery, dirt-disturbing parkour, swift traversal, and intense-looking combat when it releases May 24. **BY JILL GRODT**



QUICK TAKE

Forspoken has some impressive talent fueling its development, and I'm delighted to see Amy Hennig bringing her writing skills into the mix. Her sensibilities have elevated series like *Legacy of Kain* and *Uncharted*, and it was a tremendous shame that we never saw her *Star Wars* game come to light.

— MATT MILLER



PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions **RELEASE** May 24



ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

Year two dives into mythology

Over the course of the last year, Assassin's Creed Valhalla has proven to be one of the more robust and popular installments of the long-running franchise. Recent entries like Odyssey received an impressive amount of post-release content in its first year. But even after releasing several successful, large-scope expansions in 2021, Valhalla is going strong and appears ready to outpace its predecessor by continuing its Viking voyage into a second year.

The Dawn of Ragnarök is the centerpiece of that ongoing rollout, a major new expansion set to be released in late winter, aiming to add a considerable chunk of new missions, environments to explore, and even gameplay-altering new character powers.

Both Origins and Odyssey previously set a precedent for expansion content that veers into the mythological realm. Those concepts were so successful that the core Valhalla game implemented several significant ties to Norse mythology, including extensive exploration of the realms of Asgard and Jotunheim, where important revelations established the link between Eivor and Odin. Dawn of Ragnarök is continuing that narrative thread as Odin sets out on a journey into the realm of the dwarves, called Svartalfheim. His mission? Rescue his son, Baldr, from the clutches of Surtr, the god of the Fire Giants.

Svartalfheim is a vast new play space, described as roughly one-third

the size of the entire England area in the base game. Early glimpses of gameplay reveal a sumptuous fantasy playspace, from sprawling underground dwarven forges to towering snow-capped peaks, along with plenty of appropriately stern dwarven statues and monuments scattered across the landscape.

Fighting as Odin, players must confront various enemies, including the frost-tinged Jotnar previously seen in Jotunheim. The new arrivals are the flaming forces of the Muspels; these fire giants have their own dangerous battle capabilities and have driven the dwarves out of their homes and into hiding, where you must find them to request aid.

Part of that help comes in the form of the Hugar-Rip, a magical bracer gifted by the dwarves. The new artifact lets Odin take on the power of the foes he defeats. Several of the new abilities sound especially powerful. Odin can shapeshift into a raven to descend on enemies from high and far away for a devastating assassination kill. Weapons can be infused with ice. A bow power allows players to teleport to the

location they shoot. And you can also raise fallen enemies to fight for you.

Dawn of Ragnarök is boasting 35 hours of new content – if true, that's larger than many early Assassin's Creed games were in their entirety. And beyond the big new mythology-focused storyline, Ubisoft also promises a new arena, where players can hone their combat prowess against an escalating series of challenges.

The new expansion details arrive on the heels of a surprise new content piece you can play right now. The new Crossover Stories is a fascinating experiment in which new missions have appeared in both Valhalla and Assassin's Creed Odyssey. The linked stories offer fresh revelations about the broader Assassin's Creed fiction when played in tandem. We see Eivor and prior hero Kassandra meet up in person, thanks to events we won't spoil from the conclusion of Odyssey. That new content is free in both games right now, and hopefully serves to hold fans over until our journey to Svartalfheim in early March. **BY MATT MILLER**



QUICK TAKE

If the promise of Assassin's Creed Valhalla's upcoming DLC, Dawn of Ragnarök, is realized, we could see the end of the game's world. Does this signal Ubisoft is ready to stop supporting its Viking adventure? Certainly, the end-of-times event would make it hard to continue Eivor's story.

- JILL GRODT

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC • Stadia • Luna
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Sofia
RELEASE March 10

MULTIVERSUS

Super Warner Bros.

With new content for Super Smash Bros. Ultimate sunsetting following the recent release of Kingdom Hearts' Sora, competitors in the platform fighter genre are coming on strong to dethrone Nintendo's popular brawler. Nickelodeon's All-Star Brawl was a decent shot across the bow, propped up by a roster from the network's decades-long cartoon lineage. With MultiVersus, Warner Bros. is taking aim at Smash's reign, not just with its iconic roster from Cartoon Network, but leveraging other massive universes under its umbrella; DC Comics, Looney Toons, and HBO franchises like *Game of Thrones* are all in play.

MultiVersus is a modern platform fighter where it feels like any big name can and will show up. Bringing together fighters from *Adventure Time*, *Tom and Jerry*, *Scooby-Doo*, and DC superheroes makes a diverse cast, visually and mechanically, and it's wild to see them on a character select screen together. Bugs Bunny will fight the likes of Steven Universe and Wonder Woman, and Harley Quinn can battle against Garnett and Jake the Dog, which is an exciting prospect. Warner Bros. is also bringing in some big-name voice talent to reprise their iconic roles. Kevin Conroy returns to play Batman, Matthew Lillard voices Shaggy, and Maisie Williams steps into the role of Arya Stark once again.

Separating it from other games of its ilk, MultiVersus is built for team play, making 2v2 its preferred battle style. Each character represents four roles on the battlefield – assassin, bruiser, mage, and support – with moves and attacks made with team strategies in mind. For example, Bugs Bunny can burrow tunnels across parts of a stage that his partner can also use to get around.

Steven Universe can create barriers to shield allies like a good support should, while Wonder Woman can heroically use her magic lasso to pull a friend from a dicey situation. On top of that, the entire cast features a customizable perk system to personalize your playstyle further. Mixing team compositions looks to be a crucial and fun aspect to switch things up from match to match.

Developer Player First Games is designing MultiVersus as a free-to-play experience, making money off of in-game purchases, though it's yet to be revealed what those are. The game will feature a seasonal structure with new content seemingly earned as you play. Cosmetics are a focus, giving each character elaborate skins to wear. Some new threads are spaghetti Western Tom and Jerry and the undead Black Lantern Superman, proving these are much more than simple palette swaps.

Online is also a big focus, with MultiVersus promising best-in-class

netplay with dedicated servers for the entirety of the game's life. It also supports cross-play across all available platforms and cross-progression to carry over progress to any device. Friends can form Guilds to compete with other groups, complete with leaderboards set up by the developer to see which team of fighters reigns supreme in the world.

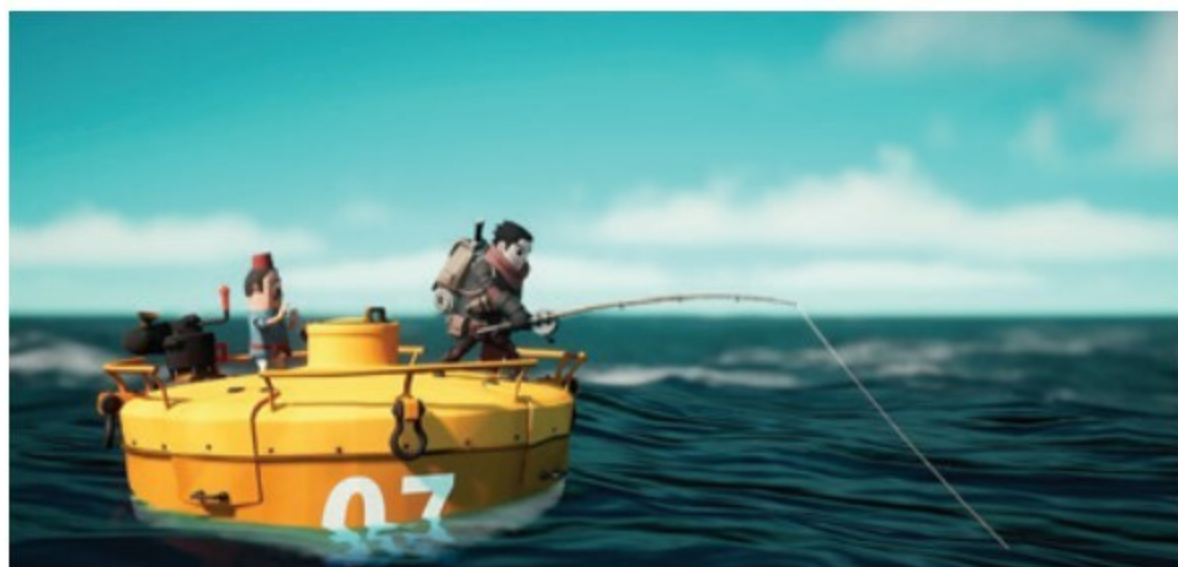
Warner Bros. and Player First are creating an undoubtedly compelling product, with a potentially stacked roster filled to the brim with fan favorites and deep cuts alike. I can't wait to learn more about the progression systems, team abilities, and unexpected newcomers who surface in MultiVersus. Warner Bros. has a staggering selection to choose from – prompting rampant speculation on possible fighters across the internet. However, we'll have to wait and see whether any of these fan-favorite characters go toe to toe when MultiVersus releases sometime in 2022. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Fighting (1 to 4-Players Online) PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Games
DEVELOPER Player First Games RELEASE 2022



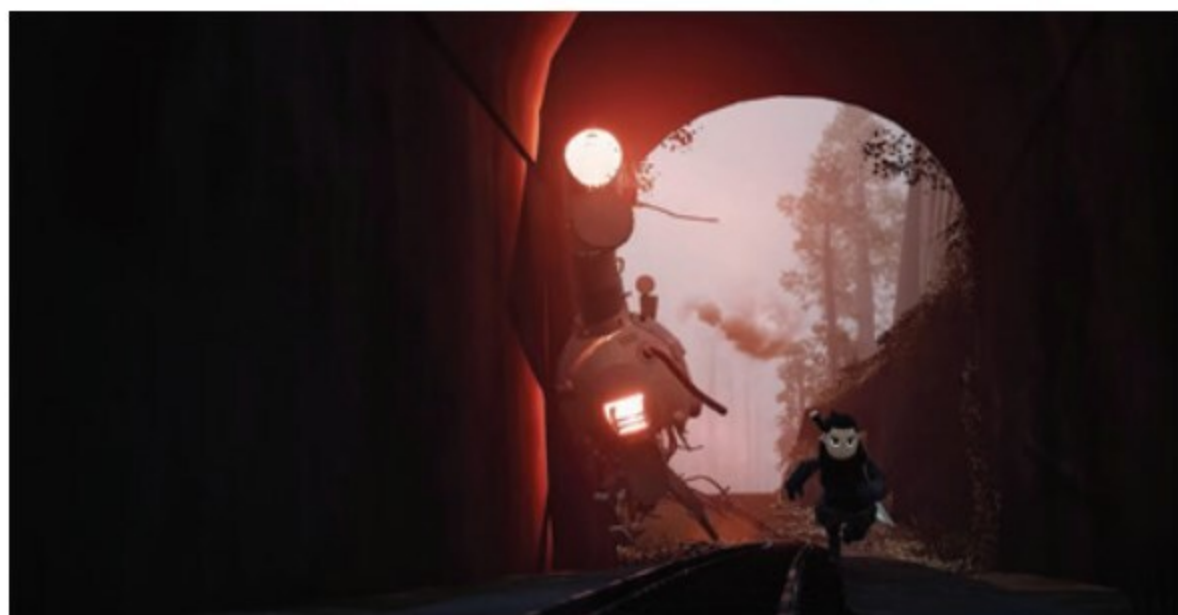
LITTLE DEVIL INSIDE

A charming monster hunt



The long-awaited *Little Devil Inside* reemerged during Sony's October State of Play event, giving us a better idea of the moment-to-moment action. Players control Billy, a hunter for hire employed by a university professor to investigate paranormal activities, hunt monsters, and locate powerful artifacts. Exploring the colorful landscape takes place on a board game-like world map where Billy and other characters take the form of cute dolls. As you waddle from point to point, you'll encounter special events – some big and some small – such as clearing a flock of sheep blocking the road. The perspective also shifts to a standard third-person view during regular interactions, such as purchasing goods and gleaning information from shop owners.

While exploring, mobs of white, multi-tongued creatures, sentient machines, and other nasty critters may ambush Billy. Thankfully, he is well-armed, using his sword to cut enemies down to size. He can even skewer foes to throw into other targets. The monsters roaming the open world are an expected hazard, but humans may present an even greater danger. Billy visits a derelict mansion in one mission to collect a mysterious artifact tied to an ancient tentacled beast. Unfortunately, the home's treacherous owner has other plans, trapping Billy in the monster's lair and leaving him for dead. How will he escape? We'll have to wait until 2022 to find out, when *Little Devil Inside* launches for PlayStation consoles, Xbox One, Switch, and PC. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action Adventure PUBLISHER Neostream
DEVELOPER Neostream RELEASE 2022

STAR OCEAN THE DIVINE FORCE

High stakes, high action



The *Star Ocean* series hasn't been able to rekindle the magic of its PS1 glory days, but Square Enix isn't giving up just yet. After 2016's disappointing *Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness*, the series is pressing on with a new entry.

Star Ocean The Divine Force's reveal trailer highlighted space travel, flashy sword attacks, and many big bads such as fire-breathing dragons and humongous frogs. It also provided a glimpse at exploration, showing characters launch themselves from great heights using a jetpack-like device to maneuver in the air.

Square Enix has been mostly quiet since *The Divine Force's* unveiling, but we do know a few things. The game brings back dual protagonists, which we haven't seen since *Star Ocean: The Second Story*. Your choices are Raymond, who spends his days as a captain of a space trading ship from an advanced civilization, or princess-knight Laetitia, who has a more noble upbringing living in a kingdom on an underdeveloped planet. These protagonists purportedly offer different gameplay and perspectives, and your allies will change depending on which one you pick.

Exploration should also be richer, as you can climb towering mountains, investigate castles, and venture into dark valleys. This sense of discovery is enhanced by the characters' ability to float in the air, which allows them to dive at enemies or fly around obstacles.

Star Ocean celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. It remains an iconic early RPG franchise due to developer tri-Ace's flair for action combat and deep systems with an unprecedented level of customization. Hopefully, tri-Ace can get the series back in top form. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing PUBLISHER Square Enix
DEVELOPER tri-Ace RELEASE 2022

A MEMOIR BLUE

Looking at memories in a new way

Memories stick with us for different reasons, and occasionally time can change our perception of what really happened. Shelley Chen, the creative director at Cloisters Interactive, experienced this firsthand when speaking to her mother about a trip they took together during her childhood. For Chen, it was a happy journey, with an exciting train ride and the bonus of one-on-one bonding with her mother. What she didn't realize was her mother was escaping a bad marriage and mustering the courage to start a new life. This revelation, which Chen calls "heartbreaking," so profoundly affected her, she created a game centered on memories and the ways our views of them can alter.

A Memoir Blue focuses on a superstar swimmer named Miriam, but at its core, it's about a mother/daughter relationship. "I think this game is almost like a message for mothers who work really hard for their kids," Chen says. To showcase this, Miriam, as an adult, revisits her relationship with her mother. Light, color, and movement all come together in gameplay vignettes as you dive into Miriam's memories, with 2D animations representing her past and 3D showcasing the present. This juxtaposition shows Miriam as a cheery, innocent child, whereas present-day Miriam is much more serious and dejected.

Since Miriam is a swimmer, water is a huge motif. In our hands-off demo, it's ever-present – rain pours, water seeps out from under a radio, and ice cubes hit the bottom of a water glass. Chen liked that water pressure could act as a parallel for real-life feelings. "When you're depressed, and you feel like something's on top of you, it's just like diving into water," she says. "I thought that made

an interesting connection between what [Miriam] feels as a swimmer and the feeling she feels about a broken relationship."

The story is told entirely without words, relying on atmosphere, music, and character animations to depict the emotional journey. "What we found interesting is, while we were playtesting our demo, people noticed different things and came up with different [interpretations], but they were all relatively similar ideas [about] what's going on. I thought that was fun. Because most narrative games tell you the story, but [here] the player becomes [part of] the narrative themselves."

Chen, inspired by titles such as Kentucky Route Zero and Journey, often refers to the game as "weird" and "niche" due to its subject matter and presentation. "I will say it will feel less like traditional gameplay," she says. "Some may argue it's more of a puzzle game, but that's definitely not our intention. From my perspective, I want it to feel like you're reading a novel – so every single action that you do is like flipping a page to see what happens next."



According to Chen, the team wanted to make interfacing with in-game objects very intuitive to keep you immersed in the story. During our demo, interacting with the world included picking up a cell phone to send a text, stamping a train ticket, and tearing down ads. At one point, a train car becomes submerged underwater, and the protagonist follows footsteps and schools of fish to the next destination.

A Memoir Blue looks like a unique and emotional experience worth watching out for. Annapurna Interactive already has a great track record publishing story-driven, experimental games. Here's hoping A Memoir Blue adds to that repertoire. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

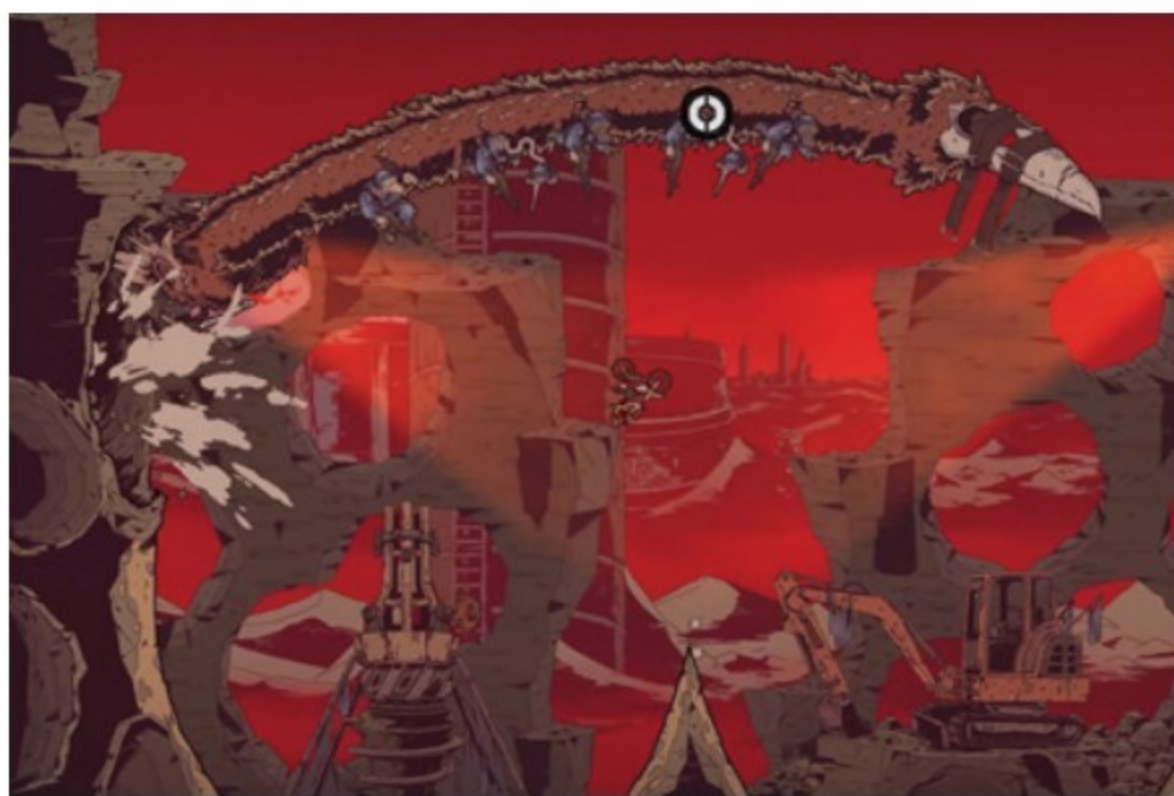




HAUNTED CHOCOLATIER

Years after the release of his hit debut, *Stardew Valley*, developer Eric Barone has announced his next project, *Haunted Chocolatier*. The game is in early development but has all the visual charm of Barone's first title. However, instead of a farm, players tend to a ghost-filled chocolate shop, with more combat and a slightly gloomier tone this time around. We don't know when we'll get our hands on *Haunted Chocolatier* or which platforms it will appear on, but we can't wait to see what Barone has up his sleeve. **BY JILL GRODT**

LAIKA: AGED THROUGH BLOOD



Laika is a western-inspired "motorvania" that lets players explore a post-apocalyptic desert full of anthropomorphic animals. Questionable pun aside, combining *Metroid*'s exploration-based action/platforming with a motorcycle is a brilliant idea. Players jump into the role of a cycle-bound mother coyote who must race through a war-torn world on a quest for vengeance. Players race across sand dunes and perform stunt jumps as they engage in stylish slow-mo shootouts. We don't have an exact date for *Laika*, but developer Brainwash Gang hopes to bring the title to PC sometime soon. **BY BEN REEVES**

SONG OF NUNU: A LEAGUE OF LEGENDS STORY

Tequila Works' latest is *Song of Nunu: A League of Legends Story*, and as the name implies, it's set in the world of Riot Games' popular MOBA. You play as Nunu, a child looking for their mom, with the help of Willump, a puzzle-solving yeti. Promising an emotional story, *Song of Nunu* hits PlayStation, Xbox, Switch, and PC sometime in 2022. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**





THE KING OF FIGHTERS XV

King of Fighters fans only have a couple of months left before they can throw down for the fifteenth time. Favorites like Ryo and K' return alongside newcomers such as graffiti artist Isla in a more role-driven approach to traditional 3v3 matches. Each character falls under Point, Middle, and Anchor, which influences their performance and can be mixed and matched. The new Shatter Strike offers an improved parry system, and players can increase their offensive and defensive capabilities by triggering new Max Modes. The King of Fighters XV launches February 17 for PlayStation, Xbox, and PC. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

BLAZING STRIKE

2D fighting games may be alive and well through the genre's most iconic names, but that isn't stopping talented indie developers from paying homage to the classic entries of yesteryear. Blazing Strike, from RareBreed Makes Games, brings smooth animations, tight controls, and approachable-yet-deep fight mechanics. With systems that draw inspiration from series like Marvel vs. Capcom, Street Fighter, and King of Fighters, Blazing Strike should be on all fighting fans' radars when it launches on PS5, PS4, Switch, and PC in 2022. **BY BRIAN SHEA**



THE CRUEL KING AND THE GREAT HERO



As the daughter of a legendary hero, Yuu was raised by her father's mortal enemy, a dragon king, to repent for his sins. In this whimsical RPG from Nippon Ichi, Yuu explores an adorable hand-drawn storybook world, befriendng monsters, and hopefully living up to be a great hero like her dad with the support of her formerly tyrannical surrogate parent. **BY JOHN CARSON**

CARD SHARK



When the stakes are this high, who can afford to play fair? Card Shark places you in 18th-century France, where you learn the tricks and cheats of the game. Deal cards with both the lowest dregs of society and its highest-ranking members in this beautifully hand-drawn title when it comes to Switch and PC in 2022. **BY JILL GRODT**

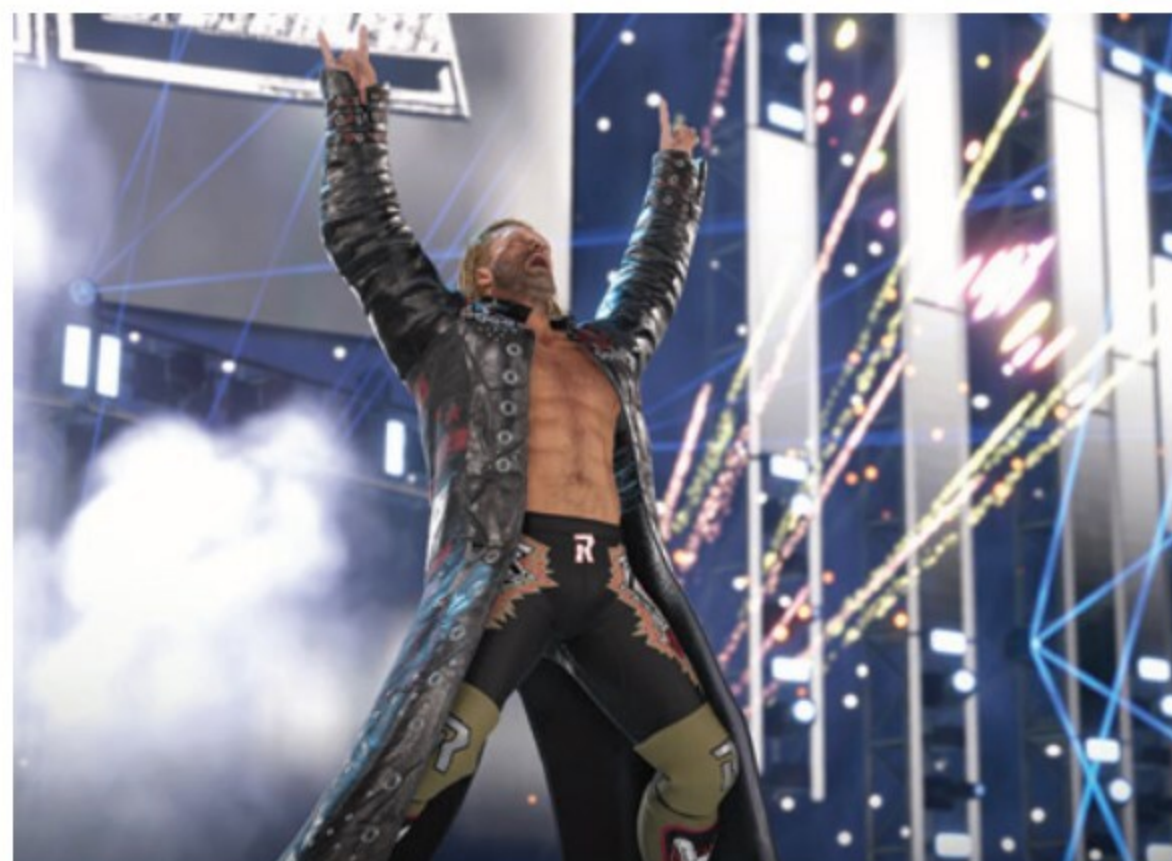
LEN'S ISLAND

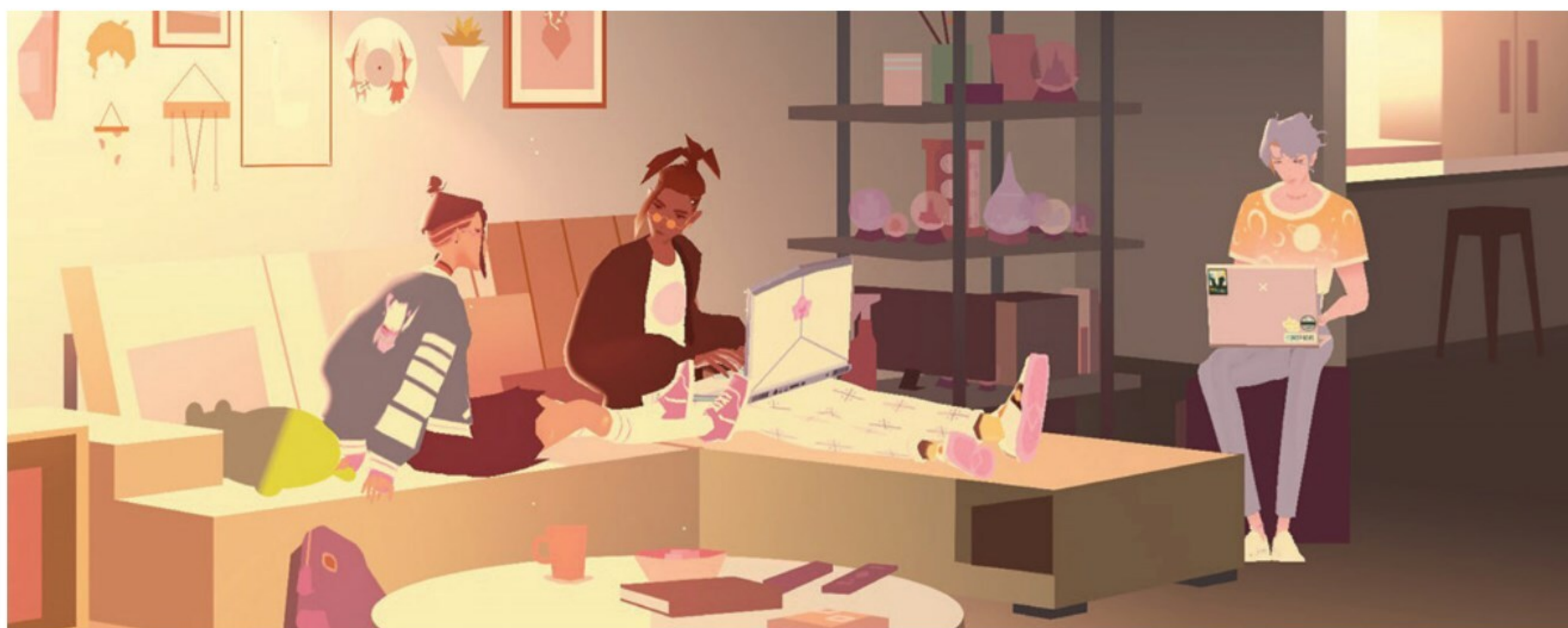
Len's Island is a game that lets you forge your own path, with activities ranging from growing crops to dungeon diving. You can choose to keep things peaceful by building up your farm and crafting the day away, or you can embrace the action by throwing yourself into dangerous combat. The game released in Early Access last month and developer Flow Studio plans to keep it in development for another 2 to 3 years. **BY JILL GRODT**



WWE 2K22

After spending two years on the sidelines, WWE 2K22 returns next year promising to "hit different." Addressing feedback from the maligned 2K20, the game engine has been rebuilt from scratch and boasts improved gameplay, graphics, and presentation. Modes like MyGM and 2K Showcase (centered on Rey Mysterio) return along with the new MyFaction, which lets you manage your own stables. If that doesn't whet your appetite, 2K promises to share more details during a January reveal event. WWE 2K22 launches in March. **BY MARCUS STEWART**





WE ARE OFK

Sitting somewhere between a choose-your-own-response adventure game and an interactive music video, *We Are OFK* is a new game about, well, the band OFK. Alongside playing through five of the band's different interactable music videos, the game tells the story of how OFK came together in Los Angeles. One of the big features developer Team OFK pitches is the game's text system, which it says will allow players to spam emojis and send emotional or "thirsty" texts. Look for *We Are OFK* on PS5, PS4, and PC in 2022. **BY BLAKE HESTER**

MONARK



Oozing Persona-like style, this tactical RPG takes place within the halls of Shin Mikado Academy. There, you'll take up otherworldly arms against a pantheon of Pactbearers, seven individuals who have formed bonds with powerful Daemons known as Monarks. By taking on Daemonic fiends of your own and wielding the power of your Ego, you aim to end the distortions and return to the outside world. **BY JOHN CARSON**

FRESHLY FROSTED

Prepare to get hungry when *Freshly Frosted* hits PC sometime soon. *Freshly Frosted* is a puzzle game that puts you in charge of a factory making delectable treats. To be successful, you have to snake conveyor belts from one machine to the next in the correct order. Because it would be unseemly to get a donut with sprinkles placed under the frosting. **BY JILL GRODT** ■



Reviews

spotlight

70 HALO INFINITE // **72** CALL OF DUTY: VANGUARD // **73** BATTLEFIELD 2042
74 FORZA HORIZON 5 // **75** INSCRIPTION // **76** SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V // **76** JURASSIC WORLD EVOLUTION 2
77 POKÉMON BRILLIANT DIAMOND AND SHINING PEARL // **77** SOLAR ASH

For more information on our scoring system, visit [GameInformer.com/Scoring](https://gameinformer.com/scoring)
To read all of our reviews, visit [GameInformer.com/Reviews](https://gameinformer.com/reviews)



HALO INFINITE

A return to form, and something new



Halo Infinite walks a narrow line between old and new and does it with as much success as I've seen from a game. As one of the most recognizable “feels” of play, it's confidently nostalgic and rooted in an established legacy, ably recalling the earliest games in the series. Whether it's the satisfying stick of a plasma grenade, the haughty cries of a sword-wielding stealth Elite, or the gradual discovery of a mysterious Halo ring, Infinite is an homage to Halo: Combat Evolved, 20 years after that first release. Simultaneously, 343 Industries' new game charts its own course. Equipment like the incredibly satisfying grappleshot, open-world elements that inject increased opportunities for exploration, and freeform base assaults that challenge players to think creatively – all of these and more help the formula stay fresh and relevant. The balancing act works, and this is the best a Halo game has felt in over a decade.

Master Chief's latest adventure opens in media res, with his defeat at the hands of a Brute warlord and the destruction of the UNSC Infinity. It's a reset of expectations about where the story is going after the last game and a figurative teardown of the complicated fictional framework that defined the previous two Halo entries. Master Chief awakens six months later, with a new, more naïve AI companion at his side, and sets to work doing what he does best – overcoming insurmountable odds one bullet at a time.

The resultant story is relatively simple, as he unwinds the mystery of what happened during his absence, but the narrative is tinged by vaguely mystical overtones about the absent Cortana and the long-forgotten secrets of the Halo. While some questions get answers, Infinite revels in its head-scratching perplexities, and even fervent lore enthusiasts may reach the conclusion with a resounding “huh?” That, too, keeps to the old Halo form, but this time I found much more to enjoy in the genuine character moments of hope and resilience, and I could have used a bit less bewilderment.

Halo Infinite's production values are through the roof, with breathtaking outdoor vistas and imposing

cathedral-like interiors. The score is impeccably paced, emotionally powerful, and perfectly poised between familiar motifs and surprises. Likewise, the voice actors turn in powerful performances that elevate these sci-fi figures and communicate humanity and loss. In action, everything moves and crackles with tension and excitement, from weapon flashes to vehicle explosions.

Combat plays like a dream. Each gun brings something rewarding to the table, and enemies are fierce and challenging, especially as you make a run at the vaunted legendary difficulty setting. The boss fights on the more demanding settings are tense and exciting. The new equipment, particularly the grappleshot, has a transformative effect on gameplay, leading to more mobile and vertical play. Battles carry a constant sense of movement and momentum; I couldn't wait for each subsequent encounter.

The new open-world and progression elements borrow heavily from established successes in that genre, and there's nothing profoundly innovative about the gradual takeover of a zone. But the battles felt so good that I didn't mind too much. I especially enjoyed the larger bases and outposts, which encourage creative thinking in how you approach

routing the bad guys. I also loved the small moments of discovery – hidden weapon caches on a mountaintop or caves that hold the last weapons of a doomed Marine squad.

Infinite's accompanying multiplayer suite is free-to-play, and it warrants a similar level of enthusiasm to the lengthy campaign. Whether in tense ranked matches, desperately running to capture a flag in quickplay, or smashing Warthogs together in 24-player Big Team Battles, the core competitive shooting is fast and enormously fun. The “fair start” mentality is a breath of fresh air in a multiplayer scene dominated by games with earned weapons or mismatched classes; here, if you win an exchange, it's because you scavenged the right gun and fought the best engagement.

Slow multiplayer progression systems, limited character customization, and individual weapon and grenade balance all need a good bit of adjustment in these early weeks of play. Those elements hurt my enjoyment of an otherwise rewarding match-to-match experience. But those features have already been tweaked since launch, and may be significantly different weeks from now, so there's a limit to how much I want to tear the game down when the actual multiplayer battles are so much fun.

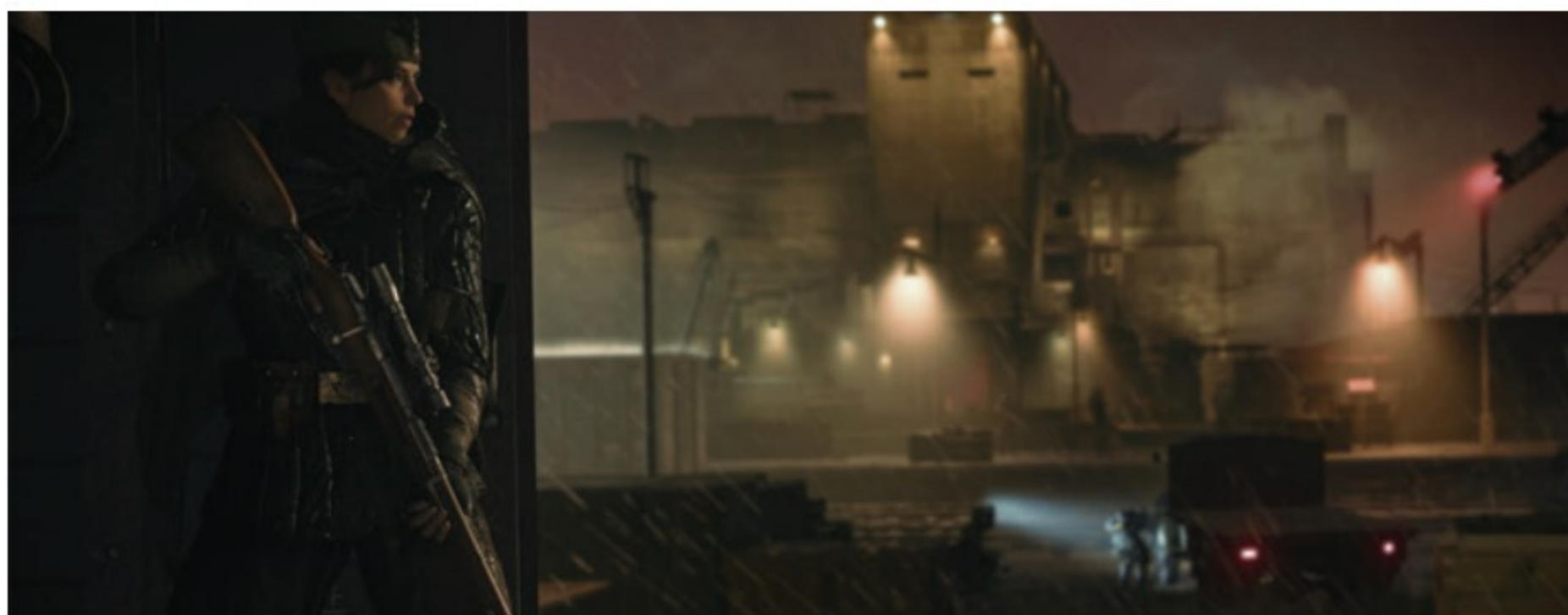
Like many, I'm sad that Halo Infinite doesn't offer cooperative multiplayer at launch, if only because it's been a bulwark of the series' identity. It's a disappointing omission, but I have to judge the game before me, not the features I wish might be there. And by that measure, Halo Infinite is a rousing success. Whether you want a big, mysterious sci-fi adventure or a chance to engage with some intense PvP, Halo Infinite nails the shots where it counts and heralds a new era for one of gaming's most recognizable mainstays. **BY MATT MILLER**

9.25

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player (Xbox Series X/S), 1 or 2-Player (Xbox One), 1-Player (PC) Shooter (24-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios **DEVELOPER** 343 Industries **RELEASE** December 8 **RATING** T

CALL OF DUTY: VANGUARD

A tumultuous trinity



Call of Duty: Vanguard is a tale of three games. As is usually the case, several of the pillars lift up the package – and one brings it down. Vanguard's campaign is weak, but multiplayer and zombies carry the title to victory. Let's break down each experience.

We'll get the rough bit out of the way first. The campaign is ambitious and beautiful in scope, taking players to multiple key locations, including Stalingrad, the Pacific, and even North Africa. While this showcases some excellent environmental diversity and its throbbing soundtrack begs to get the blood pumping, everything around these elements remains in the doldrums. Since the narrative jumps around from scene to scene, none of the characters carry any weight. They are chunks of lifeless cardboard that fail to reach even the one-note action movie tier. These characters are placed into boring segments that are as dull as possible and formulaic, without real opportunity to shine.

Multiplayer succeeds, but not due to the addition of any gun, super-slide, or jetpack mechanic. The key to the online offering is some highly impactful decision

tools on top of its already best-in-class shooting and customization. The most impactful device to the core systems is the addition of a Combat Pacing dial. With Combat Pacing, you can influence the player count and time-to-engagement of all the activities you favor. This probably seems like a small thing, but it's great because you can select exactly the kind of multiplayer matches you want, on top of the core game modes like Kill Confirmed, Hardpoint, or Domination. When I felt like lobbing a bunch of grenades while packing a shotgun loaded with incendiary ammo, I dialed into Blitz

mode, which caters to instant action with an almost immediate time-to-engagement. When I wanted something where I might not see a player immediately and had time to aim a rifle before getting shot, Tactical pacing was perfect. Even if you don't want to turn dials, Assault is a great standby for the standard-issue Call of Duty multiplayer.

Last but certainly not least is Zombies, which Treyarch designed. The studio's undead intuition rarely misses the mark, and Call of Duty: Vanguard is poised to take zombies down a fantastic road. This iteration is a bit like a roguelike zombie dungeon crawl, and that's pretty awesome.

Call of Duty: Vanguard's campaign misses the mark, but multiplayer and Zombies do the heavy lifting to get the title to a good place. If you're most invested in the single-player experience, you can pass on this year's entry, but if you're into the other modes, Call of Duty remains an excellent choice for some shooting, looting, and zombie executing.

BY DANIEL TACK

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC STYLE 1 or 2-Player Shooter
(48-Player Online) PUBLISHER Activision DEVELOPER Sledgehammer Games
RELEASE November 5 RATING M





BATTLEFIELD 2042

The battle of the bugs

Battlefield has always been the largest and loudest multiplayer experience in the business. It's the video game equivalent of Texas, and its bombast cannot be overstated. Battlefield 2042 offers a variety of ways to participate in simulated near-future warfare. Whether you prefer to fight via land or sky, you can experience dizzying on-screen explosions, tense firefights, and more vehicles than teammates who know how to drive them. Unfortunately, Battlefield 2042 is full of almost as many bugs as bad pilots, dragging down an otherwise solid on-line shooter.

If nothing else, 2042 is familiar. It continues the series' trend of delivering multiplayer maps with the largest player counts possible and a range of reliable character archetypes that have become standard in first-person shooters. The newest addition to Battlefield's long-standing formula is a weather system that lets you ride deadly tornados alongside the vehicles and debris they pick up on their route across the map. These storms are a neat touch and add a sense of panic to already-tense battles, but their inclusion feels inconsequential in the grand scheme. The 128-player matches and large maps guarantee dramatic moments, but there's a thin line separating spectacle and chaos, and 2042 often devolves into the latter.

For the first time, Battlefield hosts too many players in each match. Without the presence of Commanders to take charge of assaults, the game's main modes, at times, feel disorganized and incoherent; there's no good way for all 64 players on each team to communicate and focus their attacks. Also, respawns frequently place you in the middle of a contested area, making you vulnerable to an enemy somewhere off-screen.

The moment-to-moment game-play loop is fun, even if the larger picture is occasionally blurred. Gunplay is solid, and the vast array of vehicles are equally entertaining to pilot when running on foot becomes tiresome. Battlefield 2042 includes seven maps at launch, offering a variety of neat locations like desert-swept city centers, colossal shipyards, tropical islands, and mountainous snowscapes. Violent weather systems make each area enjoyable to navigate.

Hazard Zone, a mode introduced in 2042, pits eight squads against one another and tasks them with retrieving data drives located in satellite crash sites scattered across the map. Each location is guarded by opposing AI forces that attack your team on sight. The only way to win these matches is to extract in a highly contested Helicarrier. If you miss the flight or die before making it on-board, it's game over, and you lose the meta currency you spent in the pre-match munitions shop. Hazard

Zone is tense and strategic, and the white-knuckle firefights at the end of each game make it my favorite way to play Battlefield 2042.

Unfortunately, the game currently feels underbaked due to an abundance of bugs. While most glitches I've encountered are minor, each one dilutes the fun I have when playing. More serious snafus can negatively affect gameplay, like when sniper scopes lose their magnification mid-combat after interacting with secondary gadgets or not being able to call in air support on sandy surfaces because of an issue with the navmesh.

Battlefield 2042 is an easy recommendation for existing fans or players looking for a modern war game, but I struggle to endorse it entirely due to its current lack of polish. If DICE continues to publish hotfixes and patches as it has, Battlefield 2042 could eventually become a go-to online shooter, but it's a shame it was released like this.

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC STYLE 128-Player Online (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PC), 64-Player Online (PS4, Xbox One) PUBLISHER Electronic Arts DEVELOPER DICE RELEASE November 19 RATING M



FORZA HORIZON 5

Firing on all cylinders

Since the spin-off series' inception, Forza Horizon's approachable and exciting racing action has appealed to a broad audience. Forza Horizon 5 continues this tradition of delivering stellar driving mechanics within a gorgeous destination, this time taking players to Mexico for one of the best, most expansive racing games I've ever played.

Driving through Mexico in Forza Horizon 5 is an utter delight thanks to superb, dynamic driving mechanics that consider the terrain, weather, and handling of the more than 500 vehicles you drive. Forza Horizon 5 aptly demonstrates this through an incredible opening sequence, where different cars drop from planes and land in disparate biomes with sandstorms, snaking rivers, and wide-open straightaways, all set to diverse and fast-paced music. However, Horizon 5 further hammers home both the differences in the handling and the outstanding mechanics the longer you spend cruising around the world.

Forza Horizon 5's sense of speed is incredible. Whether you're tactfully navigating an off-road course in the lush rainforests or screaming down a desert highway, the difference between staying on the road and spinning off into the brush is razor thin. Forza Horizon 5 excels in delivering diverse courses that throw unique challenges your way, ranging from traditional races to courses with objectives.

Playground Games' lovingly crafted interpretation of Mexico and its 11 distinct biomes deliver some of the most stunning visuals I've ever seen in a video game. This open world houses a plethora of activities for players, which is astounding – if not a little overwhelming. Thankfully you can apply map filters or ask your car's A.I. to set your navigation to nearby events of your liking.

If you grow tired of competing in standard racing activities, you can participate in barn finds, where you search for and rescue classic cars in countryside barns. Meanwhile, stories have you helping characters through driving-based missions. I loved hunting down and completing those mission types, but the open world also offers a ton of quick, fun activities such as seeing how fast you can drive through a speed trap or how far you can launch off a ramp. These are fun ways to gain experience and accolades to level up your driver and vehicles with new perks, but my favorite part of these activities is how they instantly compare you to your friends. More times than I could count, I noticed my friend hit a higher top speed, causing me to turn around and try again.

While exploring Mexico, you may also stumble upon online events. These public activities let you seamlessly join with other players to complete a common goal, such as catching a certain amount of air after a jump or drifting and destroying

piñatas in an area. These are fun diversions, but my favorite online activities involve creating a convoy of players, driving around the world, and entering events with one another.

All these activities culminate in Expeditions, unique setpiece-driven campaign sequences that provide some of the most memorable events in the game. From driving up a rocky volcano as raucous music blares over the stereo to storming through an off-road course against a pair of monster trucks, the Expeditions and subsequent story missions are the moments that stuck with me the longest.

At every turn, Forza Horizon 5 impresses. From the first mile, I was on the edge of my seat. With so much to do in such a constantly gorgeous world, I suspect it won't be long before I get the itch to jump back into the driver's seat of my favorite car. Even amidst a competitive racing field, Forza Horizon 5 is a finely tuned supercar.

BY BRIAN SHEA

9.5

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC STYLE 1-Player Racing (96-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Xbox Game Studios DEVELOPER Playground Games
RELEASE November 9 RATING E

INSCRIPTION

Engraved secrets



You wake up in a dark cabin, chained to a worn table. A mysterious man sits on the other side of the room. You can't see the details of his face through the darkness, but his crazed eyes pierce the shadows. Something under your belly lurches as he invites you to play a card game. The rules seem simple; you summon creatures to attack your opponent's army of foes, and you easily win the first few hands. Still, you can't shake the anxiety of what might happen if – no – when you lose. You play on, the eyes on the other side of the table slowly burning a hole in your stomach.

Inscription is an incredible tone piece that taps into horror themes while telling an engaging and ever-evolving mystery. While those horror elements are important to the narrative, they are also just a backdrop to this adventure. I loved Inscription's moody atmosphere, but I also appreciate that it doesn't force any jump scares on the player, making it a fairly approachable horror experience.

At the center of the adventure is a robust card combat system that has you summoning creatures into lanes on a battlefield. Your creatures deal damage to the critters on the opposite side of their lanes and, ultimately, directly to your opponent. The basic setup should be familiar to fans of games like Hearthstone and Magic: The Gathering, but Inscription puts several fun twists on the formula that kept me coming back for more. For starters, some creatures require a sacrifice to enter battle. This means that when you want to summon a powerful creature like a bear, you'll have to kill several beasts that you already put on the field. I liked the push/pull of trying to get your strongest creatures into the fray without thinning your ranks too much.

Inscription's deck-building system is also much deeper than it first appears. For example, some creatures can be summoned into battle only if you have a certain number of bones acquired through fallen allies. This allowed me to turn my defeats into victories; even if all my creatures were wiped from the board, I often felt like I had an ace up my sleeve or could tap into another strategy to turn the tide in my favor.

As you continue to take down opponents, you move along a gameboard and encounter random events à la titles like Slay The Spire. Some encounters give you new cards, buff existing cards, or grant additional tools to use in combat, such as a fan that allows your creatures to fly over their opponent's heads. You also have the chance to affix sigils to your cards that offer unique powers, such as the ability to transform into stronger creatures over time or attack multiple lanes at once. These elements give Inscription's card system a unique flavor, and I loved experimenting with my deck to find new

card synergies or create brand new cards that almost felt overpowered.

Between card battles, you can stand up from the table and explore your cabin. This space is full of locked drawers and other puzzle boxes. Solving these adventure-game-like mysteries earns you new cards and brings you one step closer to unraveling Inscription's larger secrets. You eventually reach some startling revelations about who you are and why you're trapped in this cabin, but the less I say about those revelations the better. However, Inscription successfully flipped my expectations multiple times before the journey was over, and I couldn't wait to see its satisfying narrative conclusion.

Inscription is an oddity of the best order. It's a horror game that isn't aggressively trying to scare you. It's also a clever card system wrapped around a compelling mystery that plays with video game conventions. Like a bat out of hell, Inscription came out of nowhere and quickly became one of my favorite games of the year.

BY BEN REEVES

9

PLATFORM PC STYLE 1-Player Strategy PUBLISHER Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Daniel Mullins RELEASE October 19
RATING Not Rated

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V



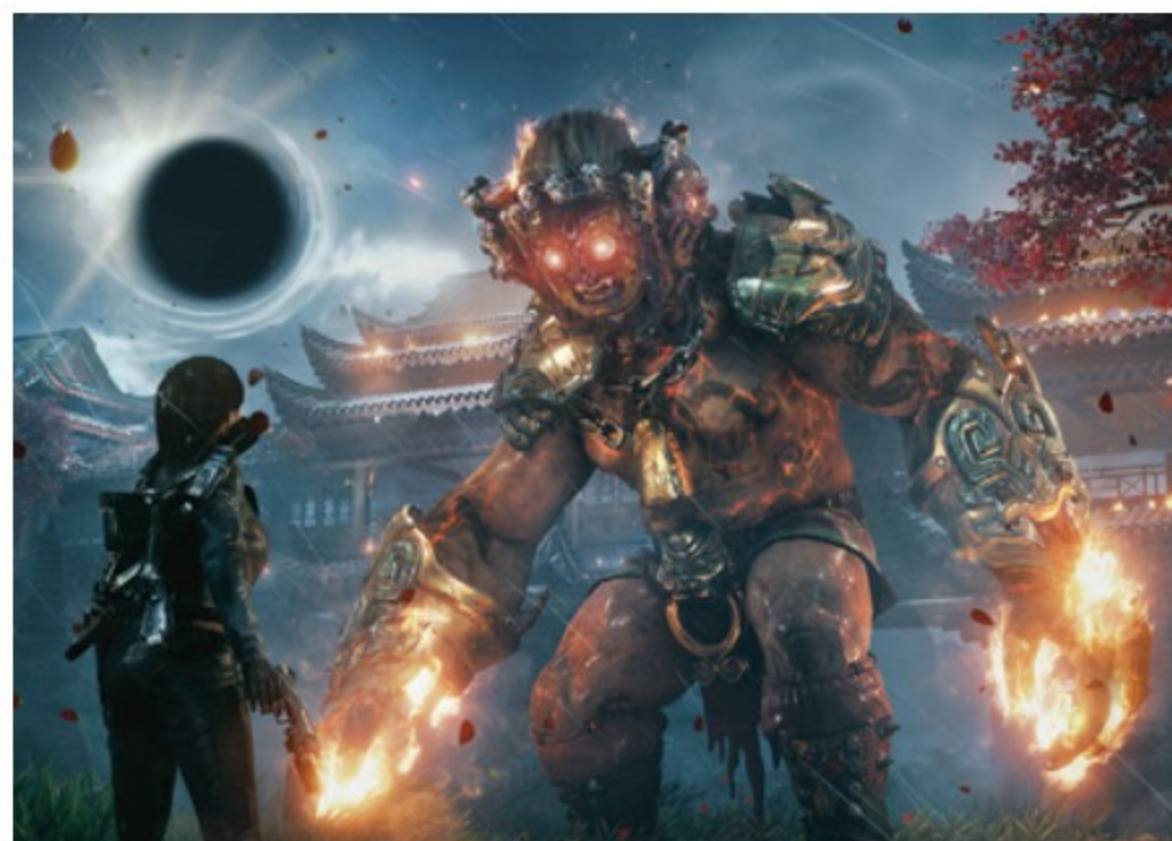
Voluntarily putting your energy into something that requires extra fortitude, commitment, and patience may not seem that appetizing at first glance, but no game has made me feel the rush of victory and satisfaction of testing my skill quite like Shin Megami Tensei V. **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

8.25

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Atlus
RELEASE November 12 **RATING** M

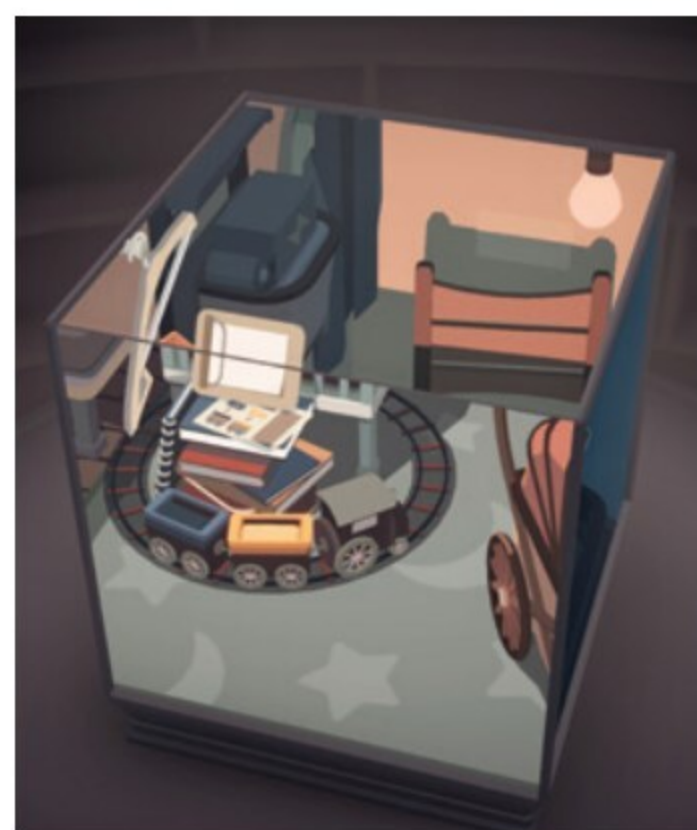
BRIGHT MEMORY: INFINITE

Bright Memory: Infinite feels like an interactive cheesy sci-fi action movie, for better or worse. It boasts incredible – and wonderfully improbable – action sequences propelled by a story that barely qualifies as narrative. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter
PUBLISHER Playism **DEVELOPER** FYQD Studio **RELEASE** November 11 (PC),
 2021 (PS5, Xbox Series X/S) **RATING** M



MONCAGE

Moncage is an intelligent puzzle game, and its perspective-based riddles stretched my imagination as each scene flowed beautifully into the next.

BY JILL GRODT

7.5

PLATFORM PC • iOS • Android
STYLE 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** XD Inc.
DEVELOPER Optillusion **RELEASE** November 16
RATING 4+

JURASSIC WORLD EVOLUTION 2

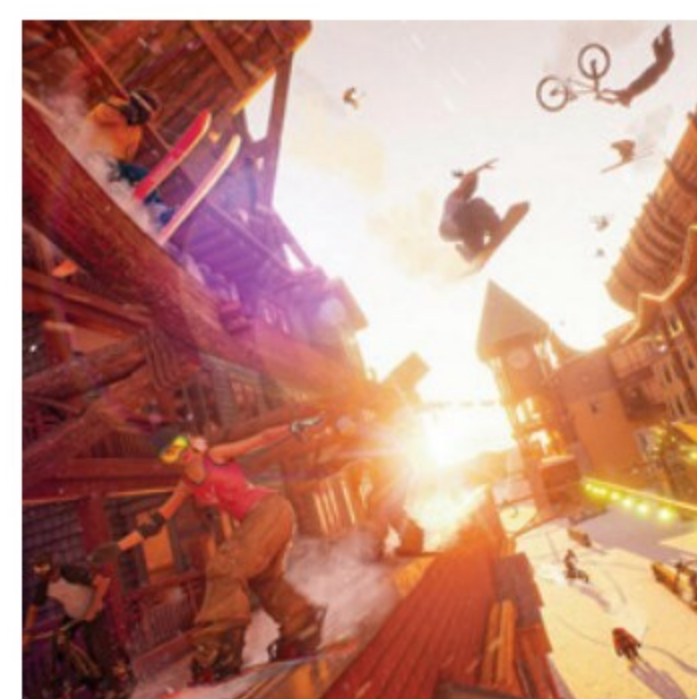
Jurassic World Evolution 2 makes as many giant steps forward as it does back but has enough going for it to deliver a fun and rewarding theme-park experience. **BY ANDREW REINER**



8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Frontier Developments **DEVELOPER** Frontier Developments **RELEASE** November 9 **RATING** T

RIDERS REPUBLIC



Rider's Republic offers an experience that, while fun and exhilarating, gets under my skin in ways no other game has. It does one or two things that I think are great, but that doesn't outweigh the things I can't stand.

BY BLAKE HESTER

6.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4
 Xbox One • Stadia • Luna • PC **STYLE** 64-Player
 Online Sports **PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER**
 Ubisoft Ancey **RELEASE** October 28 **RATING** T



POKÉMON BRILLIANT DIAMOND & SHINING PEARL

Refurbished gems

For the most part, Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl are “faithful remakes” – as The Pokémon Company likes to call them – of their namesake DS games. The skeleton is there, with the same towns, routes, trainers, and Pokédex of monsters found throughout the adventure. You still start from humble beginnings in Twinleaf Town, where starry-eyed trainers receive a Pokédex and their choice of starter Pokémon. There, your journey to conquer eight Gyms and become champion of the region begins. You’ll also uncover Team Galactic’s plans to harness the energy of evolution and the legendary creation duo of Dialga or Palkia. Nothing in the story is new or surprising, but I found that acceptable – and preferable – after being away from Sinnoh for over a decade.

Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl deviate from the mechanical blueprint, with varying degrees of success. Newer innovations like autosave or the ability to view the strength and weaknesses of moves in battle are great additions. EXP Share is, on its face, a great way to cut down on unnecessary grinding to ensure your lesser-used Pokémon are battle-ready. However, the developers haven’t taken any measures to balance this feature, and there isn’t a way to turn EXP Share off. As a

result, my over-leveled teams made big matches against Team Galactic or any of the Gym leaders feel easy and insignificant. I steamrolled through challengers on the surface of Sinnoh and had to find more formidable foes elsewhere.

My favorite place to explore has been the Grand Underground, a massive subterranean cave system lying beneath the region of Sinnoh. I mean it, this place is enormous and spans just about the size of the main map. Here, you dig for countless gems, fossils, and statues in the walls and explore Hideaways. These Hideaways are larger areas complete with biomes and level-scaled Pokémon not found on the Sinnoh Pokédex. This is where I found the challenge I craved above ground as I captured new, exotic creatures to diversify my team. Those looking to catch ‘em all should spend a lot of time in the Grand Underground, excavating precious items and filling out the Pokédex.

I’ve really enjoyed my time re-exploring Sinnoh, despite my qualms with the lack of critical path difficulty. The titles are a welcome throwback to a simpler time. Veteran trainers will find plenty here to scratch a nostalgic itch, and new trainers who missed out the first time around have a solid adventure to embark on.

BY JOHN CARSON

8.5

PLATFORM Switch STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER The Pokémon Company DEVELOPER Ilca, Game Freak
RELEASE November 19 RATING E

SOLAR ASH

A rollercoaster of style and substance



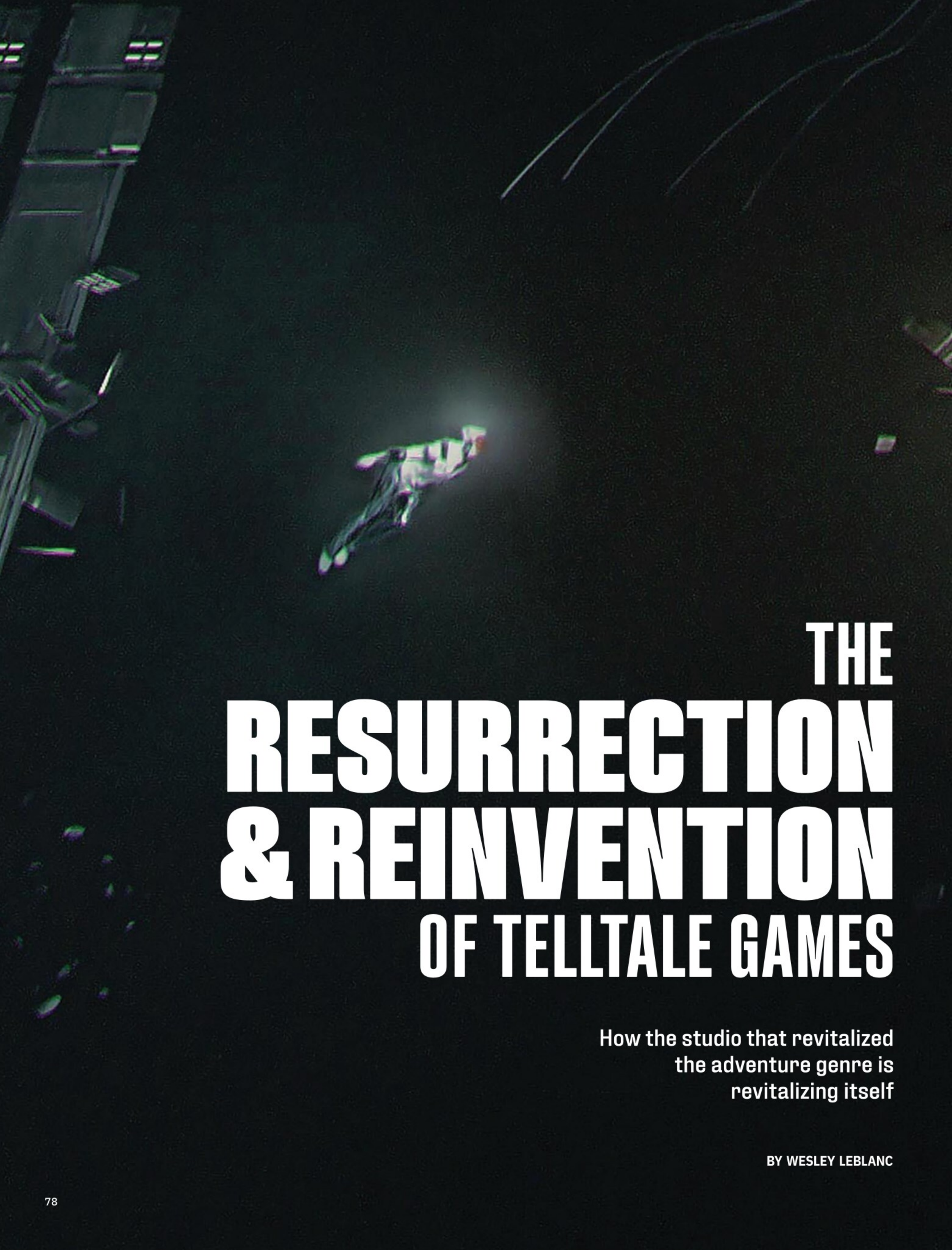
Rei awakens, dazed and confused within the Ultravoids, an exceptionally massive black hole with her planet ensnared in its vacuum. Rei was sent into the Void as part of a team to activate the Starseed, a device designed to collapse the black hole. But her allies have vanished, and the Ultravoids teems with monsters. With dire stakes and Hail Mary solutions, Rei’s solo mission is worth seeing through to its surprising conclusion in this impressive high-speed action platformer.

The game’s elegant design keeps you moving, and that extends to the simple but satisfying hack n’ slash combat. Most enemies drop after only a couple of hits, meaning you can easily kill them without stopping. Gracefully eradicating foes while artfully dodging their attacks never ceases to feel cool. My favorite bouts are against the Remnants. These towering monsters come in many types, including a bipedal warrior or a flying bat-like creature. They act as moving platforming puzzles and are the final exams of your skills.

Solar Ash had me racing across its cloud-covered playgrounds early on, searching for the next fun platforming segment. By the end, I was running to see the conclusion of its gripping narrative. Solar Ash oozes as much substance as it does style, making for a wholly entertaining space romp. BY MARCUS STEWART ■

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC STYLE 1-Player Action/
Role-Playing PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Heart Machine RELEASE December 2 RATING T



THE RESURRECTION & REINVENTION OF TELLTALE GAMES

How the studio that revitalized
the adventure genre is
revitalizing itself

BY WESLEY LEBLANC



When titles like *The Secret of Monkey Island* became rarer, so too did Jamie Otilie's time with the adventure genre, and, like many, he moved on to other increasingly popular types of games. But then, Telltale Games was formed – roughly a decade after the golden age of adventure games – built from the ashes of LucasArts by a number of former employees, piquing Otilie's interest immediately.

Otilie enjoyed the studio's first handful of games, but his interest reached new heights following the first season of Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, the game that most agree put the studio on the map. And from there, the Telltale of old was born – a studio seemingly destined to create excellent stories in pre-existing universes such as *The Walking Dead*, and later *Game of Thrones* and *Batman*.

For some time, Telltale's signature formula worked well. Until it didn't. Overburdened with work leading to widespread crunch in a market oversaturated with the Telltale name, the final blow to the studio came when investors from AMC, Lionsgate, and Smilegate pulled funding. The company began its shutdown in September 2018. It was brutal, coming as a surprise to most everyone there. It was also a massive shock to an industry already weary of crunch and the lack of safety nets for employees.

By the time Telltale shut down, Otilie's interest had grown into a full appreciation – he was truly a fan of the studio's work. Following the studio's closure, he began

to look into what went wrong and how the studio could return. About a year later, he would be the new CEO of Telltale after buying the company, or what was left of it, in 2019.

The Purchase

Otilie watched Telltale's shutdown as a game developer and studio consultant, having worked in the industry since the 1990s, leading multiple studios, such as *Galaxy Pest Control*, *Abandon Interactive Entertainment*, and more.

"I started asking around and a colleague mentioned that he knew some of the former team at Telltale and we knew about the public assignment [company collapse and asset auction]," Otilie says. "So we went through and we did the evaluation. It looked interesting and it was something we felt worth saving. It wasn't a good fit for the company that I was consulting for, which was disappointing."

"I couldn't get it out of my head," he continues. "After mulling it over for a bit, I decided to try to take it on myself and set about trying to raise some of the funds from my network of industry friends. It seemed like a great opportunity – good brands and a great game genre and legacy that should continue."

He created a holding company, LCG Entertainment, to formally make the purchase. With his love of Telltale and his experience as a studio lead, Otilie felt confident he could bring the studio back.



The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Telltale to get creative with motion capture

The First Steps

Stabilizing the Telltale catalogue was priority one. With many of its original titles pulled from storefronts, the new Telltale brought them back. The next step was developing a game. This would chart the path for Telltale's new future, one where Otilie and the leadership team would try to prevent the problems that once plagued the studio's original iteration, problems that ultimately led to its demise.

Telltale's first big reveal happened at The Game Awards 2019: a trailer for *The Wolf Among Us 2*, which was technically in development at old Telltale before the shutdown, as reported by *VG247*, but was back again as a completely different sequel. It was intriguing, but when your catalogue includes franchises as large as *Game of Thrones*, choosing to return with a sequel to *The Wolf Among Us*, a much smaller IP, comes off a bit odd. The choice to do so, though, was clear as day for Otilie.

"Wolf is a smaller IP, yes, but it's also one of the more successful titles of former Telltale ... and this sequel is something fans have been wanting for years," Otilie says. "It's also a good connection point to what Telltale was, right? We should communicate with the audience that's

out there and let them know, 'Hey, we hear you, and we can't do everything you're asking us for, but this thing that you're asking for, we can do this,' and so we did."

The Wolf Among Us is based on Vertigo Comics' series *Fables*. Similar to the comics, the game centers on Bigby Wolf, the sheriff of Fabletown in New York City. As the name suggests, Fabletown is a community where characters from fables and fairy tales reside. However, when the relatively quiet community becomes home to grisly murders, players must guide Bigby through the investigations across five episodes.

Wanting to do right by the first game and the fans that loved it, Otilie reached out to AdHoc, a company formed in 2019 by former

Telltale creative directors, cinematic directors, and writers, many of whom worked on the first *Wolf*. AdHoc became collaborative partners on the sequel. The new Telltale, which today is made up of nearly 50-percent former Telltale employees, is developing *Wolf 2* – handling game design, programming, mocap, and more – but Otilie wanted AdHoc on board as the creative team.

"When we joined the project, one of the first things we agreed on is that we didn't want to reboot things," AdHoc COO and co-founder Nick Herman says. "There's plenty that will change, but it's always in service to the original vision for the project. As much as we love Season One, we remember all the pieces that fell short or were not pursued due to a variety of technical or creative constraints. With new studio leadership and an upgraded engine, we're able to revisit a lot of those conversations and take bigger swings."

There were still many questions on the table, however. Art style? Keep it similar to the first, Otilie says. Story? The team opted to pick up six months after the end of *Wolf 1* and set it in winter. Characters? Bigby Wolf, of course, and Snow White, from the first game. The engine? It was time for a change.

Avoiding the Problems of Telltale's Past

Zac Litton has nearly eight years of Telltale development under his belt. He started as a technical director at the former iteration of the studio before becoming Telltale's first vice president of engineering. After Telltale was purchased, Otilie reached out to Litton to chat, and it wasn't long before Litton was back, this time as CTO.

Litton quickly got to work helping the new Telltale rediscover and reconfigure its pipeline, something he says is critical to studio success.

"It was like, 'Hey, what's our pipeline going to be?' And it's not just the engine, but the pipeline is everything," Litton says. "It's how the writers are going to write; it's how the engine is going to perform; it's how you handle editing and updates ... it's everything, really."

In the past, Telltale developed games using its own proprietary engine. And while that worked well in some respects, at the new Telltale, the decision was made to also utilize Epic's Unreal Engine. Using Unreal as a foundation



Refreshed with a new look and refined art style, *The Wolf Among Us 2* will feature the same Bigby Wolf and Snow White you know and love

and adding in layers of Telltale's custom engine on top of it has changed everything, Litton says. Not only is Unreal an engine used industry-wide, which means finding people that can develop Telltale games is significantly easier than it's ever been, but it's open, too, meaning Telltale can use it alongside its own engine to great success.

This ultimately leads to a smoother pipeline, which Otilie and Litton both believe to be one facet of removing crunch.

"A lot of things didn't get out as clean as we would have liked them to at [old] Telltale because of time," Litton says. "You can have a wonderful engine with lots of capabilities to provide really smooth content, but if you don't have the time to utilize those tools to the maximum extent, you're not going to get the product you want out."

Add in Telltale's old episodic nature to those difficulties, where the studio immediately shifted to working on the next episode after pushing the one before it live, and the work begins to pile up. That's when crunch can occur, but Litton and Otilie say they are working hard to ensure the studio has the right tools in place to avoid that.

Otilie is quite open about Telltale's former barriers and challenges – he, of course, wants to be, but he also must be. Creating a staff that's almost 50 percent former Telltale employees doesn't happen by telling people who were messily laid off that said studio is back. It happens by explaining why Telltale needed to come back and how the new company is going to avoid its former fate.

Beyond a better engine, Telltale has adopted a distributed development model to smooth things out and (hopefully) avoid crunch. Instead of rounding up 400 employees in a studio located in an expensive city like San Francisco, the new Telltale is utilizing the work of developers around the world.

"The world's changed," Otilie says. "[Distributed development] is about ease. What are easy things to outsource? Art. Everybody outsources art at this time, right? We're doing 80 percent of our work externally across a couple of different teams, and we're getting great quality out of it. I'm stunned at some of the projects that the teams and individuals from outsourced companies we work with create

... and so why wouldn't we work with them? Distributed development is really about creative freedom in that way ... and it's about keeping our costs manageable."

Otilie says Telltale's stance on crunch extends to outsourced work as well, stating that the studio employs "the same planning and iteration workflow on all of our projects and endeavor to partner with companies who share our view that a healthy work-life balance is important."

If one thing is clear, Otilie isn't concerned with saturating the market with Telltale games. He just wants people

With new studio leadership and an upgraded engine, we're able to revisit a lot of those conversations and take bigger swings.

to be excited about a game with the Telltale name behind it, even if those games don't come out as often as they used to. That starts with the script and finding the right people to write it. It's why AdHoc is helping develop Wolf 2.

"We can do a lot of [script] iteration when we're not paying 400 people to kind of contain that," Otilie says. "It's so helpful in terms of the process ... because we don't want to move forward until we're heading in the right direction with our story."

Perhaps one of the biggest changes with new Telltale is the way its games will be released. Previously, Telltale would release an episode and spend however much time it needed to get the next one out, but, history shows that approach often led to crunch. That resulted in waning interest over time.

Otilie says players can expect Telltale games to be essentially done when the first episode is released. This means players won't need to wait months to see what happens next in the story. Telltale will announce its release schedule ahead of time, and fans will only have to wait a couple of weeks in between episodes. Much like prestige television, Otilie foresees Telltale releases better capturing the zeitgeist with this new model.

Concept art of a Fabletown apartment in *The Wolf Among Us 2*



AdHoc CTO and co-founder Dennis Lenart says having an entire season written – in this case, *Wolf 2* – before production begins is very new, and it's something the AdHoc team greatly appreciates.

"This completely changed how high-level decisions were made and allowed us to better plan on the design side – especially for aspects like choice cadence and pacing of gameplay, of which there is more this time around," he says. "It's especially hard when you're accounting for player choice, but now that we have more than eight weeks to create an episode, we can prioritize things that previously would have been a luxury."

Otilie says this new release schedule format is another thing that will help keep crunch out of Telltale. Put bluntly, Otilie says "no crunch" is a core belief for the new studio. He wants to avoid micromanagement, choosing instead to empower employees to work during work hours and go home and enjoy their lives when their shift is up – "you're a better person that way," he says.

The Return of Telltale and Bigby Wolf

Months of pre-production work culminated in the *Wolf 2* trailer that aired at The Game Awards 2019. Otilie called it a defining moment for the studio.

"That night was pretty special," Otilie says. "It's the night where we all felt like we are in the right place and the right time, and we are going to make this happen.' It went so well – we got a standing ovation. It was a moment of vindication. It was a moment where this journey had really paid off."

Now, two years later, *Wolf 2* is in full production. The script is finalized, and mocap is underway. Otilie says fans can expect *Wolf 2* to answer some dangling questions, but not all as some are better left ambiguous. AdHoc expanded a bit on what players can expect, though.

"*Wolf 2* takes place after *Snow White* steps in as Deputy Mayor of Fabletown, which gets us closer to where the

comic starts, but Bigby is still struggling to make the transition from the typical fairytale villain to Sheriff and protector," Herman says. "This season explores more of the nuances and difficulties of hiding in plain sight, dealing with mostly new Fables and taking place all over New York. The city at large definitely plays a bigger role this time around."

"Creatively, it's had the most time in the oven out of any Telltale game ever, so we hope that comes through in the final product," Herman adds. "Personally, I'm excited for fans to have a chance to explore its new themes. Without revealing things, it's even more about the human experience of being a Fable, which, like the comic, strips away the fantasy and leaves the player with a lot of uncomfortable and messy decisions to make."

Into The Expanse

Telltale is also developing a game based on *The Expanse*, the popular book-series-turned-Amazon-TV-show set in a solar system colonized by humans as they spread out into space. Similar to how it opted to work with AdHoc on *Wolf 2*, Telltale is working with Deck Nine, the studio behind 2021's *Life Is Strange: True Colors*, on its *Expanse* project. Telltale views it as a co-development deal, with Deck Nine doing a lot of the heavy lifting using Telltale's engine and tools. It's a Telltale story told using Deck Nine's voice.

"We visited Deck Nine early into the reboot of *Wolf 2* to discuss possible co-development, but we quickly realized that we wanted to give this talented team more room to run on a project that didn't have limitations and expectations predetermined by being a sequel," Otilie says.

Deck Nine game director Stephan Frost says it's been a "solid partnership" and especially unique in that it gives the two teams a chance to learn from one another. As for where it belongs in the timeline, it'll be a prequel in the same universe as Amazon's series.



The Artemis, a scavenging vessel just outside of Jupiter



Deck Nine is aiming for “stylized realism” in *The Expanse: A Telltale Series*



Camina Drummer actor, Cara Gee, is voicing the character and providing motion capture, too

“We were pretty nervous about pitching [a prequel] to the creators, and then we specifically picked a character they hadn’t done a backstory for because we wanted to do something canon or something that could become canon for the character,” Otilie says. “And so we really liked [Camina] Drummer.”

Drummer is unique in that she’s not from Earth, nor is she from Mars – she’s a Belter (someone born in the Asteroid Belt, or outer moons or planets) and with that comes a lot of characteristics that Deck Nine and Telltale say they are excited to play with. Frost says Drummer is aboard a scavenging vessel named *The Artemis* in the game.

... it’s important to this new iteration of the studio to place the tracks before the train, and it seems that’s exactly what Telltale is doing.

“There’s a mixed crew of high personality Innerers and Belters,” he says. “Players will work with that crew, explore various locations beyond the belt, and, of course, need to make life or death decisions that will affect the crew.”

“She’s also unique as a Belter,” Otilie says. “She’s a little bit more moral, but very black and white, really angry, but not in an unjustifiable or irrational way, right? She’s very controlled and focused and introspective in terms of how she makes decisions as a character, and we wanted to explore how she became that person ... and that story didn’t exist yet. None of the novellas tell that story, and there were no plans to go and tell that story [in the TV series]. Drummer doesn’t really exist in the books. She’s an amalgamation of different characters ... and we like that because it means there’s a lot of room to have an interesting story develop around her. In our game, the show exists in a microcosm. We put you in the universe you expect to be in.”

Drummer actress Cara Gee will be voicing the character in the Telltale game and providing motion capture for Drummer’s unique movement as well. Frost says there are “other actors from the show written into the story,”

but that the teams can’t yet talk about them.

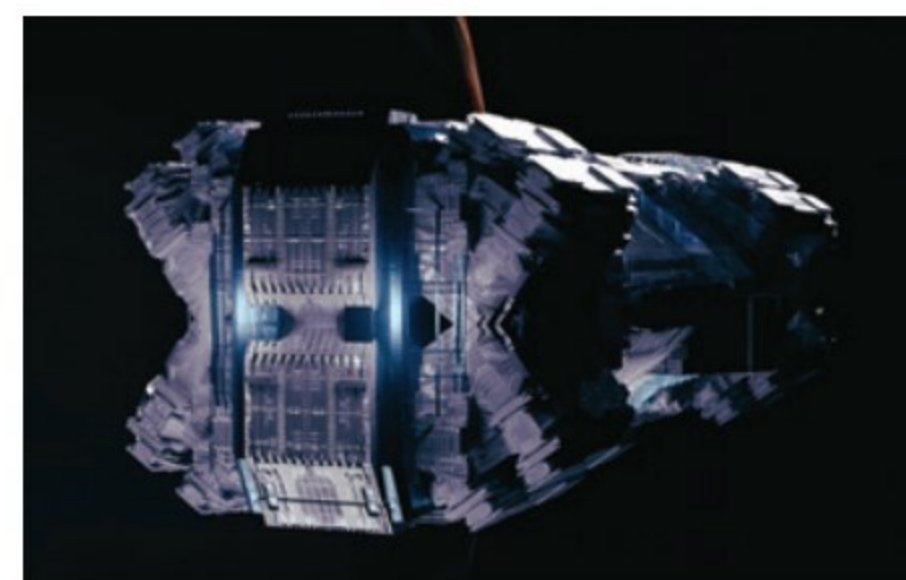
“Who she follows or respects changes based on their actions,” he says, expanding on what else players can expect in the game. “Consider that she used to work with Anderson Dawes, and the extremist faction of the Belt, but then turned away from him and ended up trying to build something new with Fred Johnson, a moderate. What precipitated that change? How does she unite her fierce loyalty to the Belt with her well-earned cynicism for powerful men who claim to have all the answers? These are questions we think players will love exploring with us.”

For now, *The Expanse* joins *Wolf 2* in the “we’ll share more when we’re ready” chamber, which, in a way, speaks to this new Telltale. Litton says it’s important to this new iteration of the studio to place the tracks before the train, and it seems that’s exactly what Telltale is doing.

If one thing is clear, the people we spoke to at Telltale are excited about what’s to come, which Otilie says will feature new territory for Telltale while respecting the name’s legacy.

“That legacy is why we’re doing this,” Otilie says. “The journey will continue. We will not fall into the trap of replicating what was there. *Wolf 2* will be the closest thing we do to what people are familiar with [with] Telltale, and that’s the reason we’re doing *The Expanse* with Deck Nine. It’s a totally different voice, completely different aesthetic and pacing. We’re going to continue to work with internal and external teams, and we’re going to match creative leadership to the IPs we pick and give people the opportunity to tell interesting and compelling stories.”

“That’s really the best part of what we’re doing, right? We get to tell these stories and take risks and do new things and surprise people. It’s all kind of fan service. Telltale tells stories in universes we all love. [That fan service] is part of our brand.” ■





ONE LAST THING

BEST ENDING

AS THIS ISSUE OF *GAME INFORMER* COMES TO A CLOSE, there's one more game from 2021 we want to honor. Fittingly enough, it's all about the ending.

Before Your Eyes' beautiful yet heartbreaking finale absolutely wrecked us. We haven't cried this hard at a game's conclusion in years, and it's a moving send-off for a powerful story centered on life, death, self-reflection, and self-worth. Set aside two hours, grab plenty of tissues, and enjoy one of 2021's most outstanding narratives – preferably with a loved one close by. ■

GI MERCH



snag yours

➤ gameinformer.com/merch ➤➤

